

COMPOSERS AS ETHNOGRAPHERS:
DIFFERENCE IN THE IMAGINATIONS OF COLIN MCPHEE, HENRY COWELL,
AND LOU HARRISON

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ABSTRACT

ETHAN LECHNER: Composers as Ethnographers: Difference in the Imaginations of
Colin McPhee, Henry Cowell, and Lou Harrison
(Under the Direction of Sarah Weiss)

This is a study of the ideas of musical difference held by three twentieth-century composers—Colin McPhee, Henry Cowell, and Lou Harrison. Each wrote about culture, and was thus in a broad sense an ethnographer, and each was influenced by non-Western musics in the development of innovative compositional techniques. I discuss how their very different views on non-Western musics were inextricable from other aspects of their professional work. I compare their ideas to those of his closest colleagues and contrast them with dominant anthropological understandings of culture difference in the twentieth century, particularly the attitude of cultural relativism dominant in Ethnomusicology. In the introduction I discuss the importance of formulations of differences to American modernist composers generally, in particular the lines of differentiation they drew among their own music, “conventional” Western music, European music, Romantic music, “Oriental music,” and “primitive music.” I argue that modernists very often formulated their representations of non-Western musics through the same process of negation of conventional ideals and styles by which they developed their own aesthetic programs.

To my Parents, Judith and Norbert Lechner

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PREFACE

My original goal for this dissertation was to come to an understanding of cultural difference that could account for hybridity in the compositions of a variety of composers. In the end, I do not claim to have come to such an understanding, or to have arrived at an analytical approach that can account for music that subsumes difference in the manners of works as varied as Colin McPhee's *Tabuh-tabuhan*, Henry Cowell's *United Quartet*, and Lou Harrison's Double Concerto. My subjects have not cooperated with that aim. Each approached the issue of cultural difference uniquely—though certainly not in isolation from others grappling with the same issues—so that I have been drawn away from my original goal of explicating a single method by which to analyze them all, and have been forced to delve more deeply into their particularities. The analyses that I have done, then, have necessarily become specific to the terms by which each of these composers dealt with the same concerns that were originally my own: namely, the bafflement of cultural difference, and how, in the context of music, differences sometimes dissolve into sameness.

I had originally planned to develop a theory of intentional hybridization in composition. Through the development of the study, I have been forced to come to terms with the insight that meaning (defined broadly to encompass all aspects of musical experience) is not inherent to music but is something that arises in the moment, imputed

by the listener willingly or unwillingly. This implies that hybridity is also not something that can be considered immanent to music and analyzed as such, but is something that must be considered in the terms by which it is ascribed. Thus, the central question of the project has been transformed from *How can the hybrid qualities of the musics of various composers be understood?* to *How did various composers understand their musics as hybrid, on what terms did they stake their claims to hybridity, and how did they articulate their claims to others?* The result is that the word *hybrid*, which was the central concept of the dissertation at its conception, is now practically absent from my discussion.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Frequently cited works are identified with full reference in the first citation, and subsequently with the following abbreviations:

| | |
|--------------|--|
| <i>AMB</i> | Colin McPhee, “The Absolute Music of Bali” |
| <i>HIB</i> | Colin McPhee, <i>A House in Bali</i> |
| <i>CTW</i> | Carol Oja, <i>Colin McPhee: Composer in Two Worlds</i> |
| McPhee Coll. | Colin McPhee Collection, UCLA Ethnomusicology Archives |
| <i>CAW</i> | Miller and Lieberman, <i>Lou Harrison: Composing a World</i> |
| <i>LHR</i> | Peter Garland, ed., <i>A Lou Harrison Reader</i> |
| <i>GOM</i> | Harry Partch, <i>Genesis of a Music</i> |
| <i>MP</i> | Lou Harrison, <i>Music Primer</i> |
| Cowell Coll. | Henry Cowell Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts |
| <i>NMR</i> | Henry Cowell, <i>New Musical Resources</i> |
| <i>NOM</i> | Henry Cowell, <i>The Nature of Melody</i> |
| <i>HCB</i> | Michael Hicks, <i>Henry Cowell, Bohemian</i> |

Chapter I: Introduction

“Loosely speaking, every one interested in modern music realizes there is some resemblance between certain aspects of primitive and of contemporary music.”
Henry Cowell, 1933

In his introductory overview of “modernism” for the *Oxford History of Western Music*, Richard Taruskin comments on the special relationship the movement had with its time:

To make an ism out of being modern is on the face of it paradoxical, since if modern simply means "of or pertaining to present and recent time" (as one dictionary defines it), then everyone is modern by default, and always has been, since we cannot live at any other time than the present. To be modernist, then, is more than to be modern. Modernism is not just a condition but a commitment.

It asserts the superiority of the present over the past (and, by implication, of the future over the present), with all that that implies in terms of optimism and faith in progress."¹

Based on my own examination of United States composers of the first half of the twentieth century, it appears that Taruskin’s statement can be amplified somewhat. Modernism was characterized not only by enthusiasm for the progressive aspects of the present, but also by antipathy for the present’s recalcitrant mainstream. Modernism’s feelings for the immediate past (specifically the nineteenth century) were largely disdainful, while its feelings for the long past were often admiring. With respect to the

¹ Richard Taruskin, *The Early Twentieth Century*, volume 4 of *The Oxford History of Western Music* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 1.

rest of the world, modernism in the U.S. was often pointedly dismissive towards Europe, while it was concerned with gaining deeper understanding and appreciation of the musics of the non-West and its own “folk” and indigenous “primitives.” As will be seen, within the minds of modernists all of these issues were inextricably related.

For modernism, particularly in America, cultural difference was always an immediate concern, even when it was not the explicit concern. This fact is reflected in the intensive study of non-Western musics in which modernists frequently engaged, and which is documented in their writings. It is also reflected in the frequent allusions to non-Western musics in their compositions. In this dissertation I examine how in both of these idioms, writing and composition, modernists represented both particular non-Western musics and the nature of the world’s cultural divisions in general. This introduction explicates the most general features of modernist thinking about difference, and the remainder of this dissertation analyses the written and musical works of Colin McPhee, Henry Cowell, and Lou Harrison.²

By way of introduction to these issues, consider Stravinsky, who said, “Expressiveness has never been an immanent feature of music.”³ By what means did Stravinsky ascertain certainty about the “immanent” features of music? By what methods of induction or deduction and by what evidence did he arrive at this knowledge? As we will see, one cannot get far tracing this notion and others like it without encountering the ideas about cultural difference (and non-difference) that were in circulation at the time,

² For my purposes here I define *modernism* circularly. My modernists are those twentieth-century composers who formed a discourse community, whose style of thinking about cultural difference it is my primary purpose here to explicate.

³ Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), 53.

both within the modernist composers' own community and beyond it in other fields.

Knowledge of the "immanent features" of music, whatever they were believed to be, was sooner or later connected to ideas about non-Western musics, either developed through direct observation or, as frequently, through imaginative imputation.

Indeed, Stravinsky made his above statement about the nature of music—as a universal phenomenon—in the course of describing the Russian folk poetry, in which he had observed this essential, elemental quality of non-expression (and upon which he had imputed it). It was as if, by simple virtue of being distant from Western European bourgeois culture, Russian folk peasants could by negative association be cited as the bearers of music's most elemental, "immanent" properties. It was also as if, by simple virtue of being Western, the music of the bourgeois concert hall could be regarded as in a strange way disconnected from its truest nature, its own "primitive" essence.

Stravinsky also stated, "It is in the nature of things—and it is this which determines the uninterrupted march of evolution in art quite as much as in other branches of human activity—that epochs which immediately precede us are temporarily farther away from us than others which are more remote in time."⁴ This statement provides a summary of the modernist position vis-à-vis its others as I have observed it. It indicates a belief in the unified march of culture, and an acknowledgement of the propensity to value that which was far removed in time and to regard with antipathy that which came directly before. It is the aim of this dissertation to elucidate how this style of thought played out, albeit in quite various ways, in the writings and compositions of Colin McPhee, Lou Harrison, and Henry Cowell.

⁴ Stravinsky, *An Autobiography*, 91.

If there were features of the American modernist preoccupation with difference that were historically peculiar, certainly the tendency of these composers to construct an identity for themselves—both as individuals and as a movement—in antithesis to a constructed other predated them. In very general terms, earlier ideas about cultural difference, those dominant among anthropologists in the 19th-century United States, had been largely focused upon paradigms that placed “civilized” society as unambiguously superior to all others by dint of its supposedly higher evolutionary state. Whether through explicit, theorized racism or through a notion of unilinear cultural evolution without racial differentiation as its basis, non-Western peoples were understood as crude and irrational, and their artistic products were in a significant sense irrelevant to the “civilized” person.⁵ If a great deal of effort was expended in proving this to be the case, it was then possible for a person of distinction to expend little effort looking to other cultures for artistic and intellectual guidance. Indeed, we can witness many representations of non-Western people and their music by 19th-century composers in the U.S. and Europe that were fanciful, sensational, and unconcerned with veracity.

This style of thought has been discussed at length in musicological criticisms of 19th-century representations of the ethnic other (particularly in opera). It has been frequently argued that there was an all-but-total disconnect between such musical representations and that which was represented. There was, in other words, a great deal of fantasy. Susan McClary, for instance, notes that to consider Bizet’s *Carmen* as an example of Spanish

⁵ Three resources on the history of anthropology that I have found invaluable in this study are George W. Stocking, Jr., *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1968); Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988); and Ronald E. Martin, *The Languages of Difference: American Writers and Anthropologists Reconfigure the Primitive, 1878-1940* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2005).

music “confuses the image of the ethnic other concocted by the Northern European with the thing itself...” Bizet did some research into Spanish music by studying arrangements of Spanish folk songs, but “any ‘authentic’ Spanish flavor Bizet received from this source too was already heavily mediated.” McClary states definitively that, despite “the influence of actual Spanish, Spanish-American or gypsy sources...Bizet’s agenda was not ethnography.”⁶

The very broad cultural trend that tended to validate styles of representation that were fantasies (or all but), has come to be referred to in academic discourse as “Orientalism,” and in musicological discourse it is often referred to as either “Orientalism” or “exoticism.” In musicological discussions, the term *Orientalism* refers most often to musical representations that were created, as McClary states of *Carmen*, “not through instinct or by virtue of ... borrowing from ethnic sources, but rather by means of [a] well developed set of signs that ... audiences shared...” (p. 54). To describe an opera as truly “exoticist” is then to state that the various signs (including musical ones) that it used to represent the other had only an arbitrary relationship to any actual person or peoples.

For this study, what marks the rise of musical modernism is the intellectual shift among a few early-twentieth-century composers in which explicitly condescending attitudes towards the “pre-civilized” were no longer compelling, and the rights of a composer to freely engage in fantasy was severely curtailed. A corresponding shift in anthropology was associated with Franz Boas. Beginning roughly with his critique of

⁶ Susan McClary, *George Bizet: Carmen* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), 53-54. On 19th-century musical exoticism, see also Ralph P. Locke, “Cutthroats and Casbah Dancers, Muezzins and Timeless Sands: Musical Images of the Middle East,” in *The Exotic in Western Music*, Jonathan Bellman, ed. (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1998), 104-136. Also in that collection see Richard Taruskin, ‘Entoiling the Falconet’, *Russian Musical Orientalism in Context*,” 194-217.

anthropological racism in *The Mind of Primitive Man*, anthropologists began focusing their studies of non-Western peoples into critiques both of the cultural biases in anthropological theories and of Western societal norms more broadly, rather than proceeding with an assumption of the West's unassailable superiority, against which non-Western cultures were measured and inevitably found to be inferior.

Corresponding trends in the arts began to make use of non-Western artistic products (as observed and as imagined), which had previously been regarded as culturally inferior, into critiques of prevailing aesthetics. For instance, as we will see in Chapter 2, where contemporary aesthetic norms called for continuous melodiousness, the other was invoked as a case for disjunction and percussiveness. When norms called for grand and amorphous orchestral sounds, the other was invoked as a case for sparseness and clarity. When norms demanded expressiveness, the other was invoked in the case for non-expression. The other represented a new source of authority, not based upon its acquisition of "civilization" but upon its very freedom from it. If faith in the superiority of "civilization" had produced absolutist arguments about the nature of music as a universal phenomenon, the new primitivist epistemology countered these with absolutisms of its own.

Pierre Boulez, for instance, made such statements in the tersest way, for to him there were only a few very distinct things that were of interest about "Oriental music," and those he understood as antitheses to aspects of Western music: "the time structure, the conception of time being different; the idea of anonymity; the idea of a work of art not

being admired as a masterpiece but as an element of spiritual life.”⁷ Beyond these points there was only “great foolishness” in going to the “the Orient,” for its music “that has attained perfection is now frozen, and if there is no modern Oriental music it is because those peoples have lost their vigour.” The particular aspects of “Oriental music” that interested Boulez differed from those that interested the three composers of this study, and his tone was far more arrogant than theirs. Yet, his manner of discovering Oriental music,” seeing it purely as a reflection of his own aesthetic concerns will be echoed in each chapter of this dissertation.

With the rise of modernism, constructions of difference were coming to serve a new function and assuming a new form. It was not so much that among artists and anthropologists discussions of difference were moving past binary paradigms, but that the way in which such oppositions were drawn began to shift. Before modernism (and to a great extent continuing concurrently with it), discussions of difference had focused upon the poverty of value in non-Western culture. This lack was opposed with, and gave shape to, the high value of the favored arts of “civilization.” Edward Said has described this dualism as structural to Orientalist thought and furthermore as integral to the construction of the Western image of itself. He summarizes the 19th-century propensity to categorize humanity into groups as based upon a

rigidly binomial opposition of “ours” and theirs,” with the former always encroaching upon the latter (even to the point of making “theirs exclusively a function of “ours”).... “Our” values were (let us say) liberal, humane, correct; they were supported by the tradition of belles-lettres, informed scholarship,

⁷ Pierre Boulez, “Oriental Music: A Lost Paradise?” in *Orientations* (London: Faber, 1986): 421. For a critique of Boulez’s view of culture see Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

rational inquiry; as Europeans (and white men) “we” shared in them every time their virtues were extolled.⁸

Now with modernism a double opposition was formulated: first was that between the non-West and the West, in which the non-West was interpreted as a newly significant if not superior source of influence for artists; second was the opposition between the small modernist movement and the mainstream of society. This meant that, with these two oppositions, modernism took the innovative step of correlating its own ideas and styles with those of non-Western people, rather than with the supposedly superior “West” (with which it self-identified, if only for rhetorical purposes).

As an example, we can observe Debussy commenting upon Sundanese (West Javanese) music that he heard in 1889 as, “able to express every shade of meaning, even unmentionable shades, and which make our tonic and dominant seem like ghosts.”⁹ Though Debussy’s encounter with *gamelan* was far more casual than that of the three American composers I focus upon here, in this structuring of oppositions they were alike. In remarking upon the relative merits of Sundanese music over Western music, he was on the one hand remarking that “theirs” was better than “ours.” On the other hand, once we take a closer look at that which was “ours” we see that Debussy did not in fact unequivocally identify with it, but that it was precisely what he aimed to distance himself from. By 1895 when he made these comments he had himself developed a compositional

⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). Said’s analysis of the Orientalist tradition has been critiqued by some as reductive. For a critical assessment of Orientalism’s impact on academia, see Daniel Martin Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid* (Seattle and London: Univ. of Washington Press, 2007). See also James Clifford, “On Orientalism,” in *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), 255-76.

⁹ Debussy to Pierre Louÿs, 1895, quoted in Edward Lockspier, *Debussy: His Life and Mind* (London: Cassell, 1962): 1, 115. For a detailed account of the music presented at the *Kampong javanais* at the 1889 Paris World’s Fair see Annegret Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World’s Fair* (Rochester: Univ. of Rochester Press, 2005).

idiom which had distorted conventional tonic and dominant (for instance in *Pelléas et Melisande* and *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*), and he did so, if not in direct imitation of Javanese music, then with an either/or mentality through which Javanese music and his own fell into ideological alignment.¹⁰ He made this either/or concept more explicit in a 1913 statement of how the Javanese were different from “civilized” peoples:

There were, and there still are, despite the evils of civilization, some delightful native peoples for whom music is as natural as breathing. Their conservatoire is the eternal rhythm of the sea, the wind among the leaves and the thousand sounds of nature which they understand without consulting an arbitrary treatise. Their traditions reside in old songs, combined with dances, built up throughout the centuries. Yet Javanese music is based on a type of counterpoint by comparison with which that of Palestrina is child's play. And if we listen without European prejudice to the charm of their percussion we must confess that our percussion is like primitive noises at a country fair.¹¹

We may note that each aspect of Debussy's representation of these “delightful native peoples” was articulated in antithesis from some aspect of Western culture that had become tiresome to him. If “their” music was natural, this implied that “ours” was contrived. If “theirs” was drawn from the elements of humans and nature, “ours” was

¹⁰ For a summary of the literature addressing how Debussy was influenced by gamelan, see Annegret Fauser, “French Encounters with the Far East,” chapter 4 in *Musical Encounters at the 1889 World's Fair* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005). Fauser writes, “In general terms, Debussy's orchestra, especially in *Nocturnes* (1887-99) and *La Mer* (1903-5), has been described as a “stylized gamelan” because of the often layered instrumentation. The superimposition of different timbral, rhythmical, and registral strata is also one of the character traits of works such as *Pagodes* and has been identified as influenced by the gamelan” (p. 199). Of particular relevance to my present discussion of modernist ideology is Fauser's observation that the musicological literature has tended to read Debussy's encounter with the gamelan in terms of a propulsion towards innovation, a peculiarly modernist narrative: “The musical innovations of Debussy's piano music with respect to structure and harmonic language can thus be understood through his encounters with a new sound-world. His new sonorities then found their basis in complex materials appropriated from a different world, and their presence could thus be attributed to a rupture with tradition—a concept dear to the ideology of modernism—rather than to the more suspicious notion of late-nineteenth-century French eclecticism within a continuous development of the Western tradition” (p. 200). See also Richard Mueller, “Javanese Influence on Debussy's *Fantasia* and Beyond,” *Nineteenth-Century Music* 10 (autumn 1986-87): 157-86; and Mervyn Cooke, “‘The East in the West’: Evocations of the Gamelan in Western Music,” in *The Exotic in Western Music*, ed. Jonathan Bellman (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1998), 258-80.

¹¹ Debussy, *Revue S.I.M.*, quoted in Lockspier, *Debussy*, 115.

inscribed in arbitrary treatises. If “their” percussion was sophisticated, our “civilized” percussion was, ironically, “primitive.”

What I am identifying as the modernist style of thinking amounted to a reversal but not necessarily a revision of earlier ethnocentricity. Although Debussy used of the word “primitive” as a criticism of the percussion of Western culture, he was not actually overturning the dominant cultural evolutionist paradigm in which “primitives,” conceived of as aboriginal peoples of Africa, America, Asia, and Australia, were understood to persist in the same state as Europe’s long past. It was a reversal of the system of values that underlay the paradigm, but his statement maintained evolutionist logic. Whether it was good or bad to be “civilized,” what remained certain was that some people were, and others were not. And what it was to be “not-civilized” could be determined simply by imagining the opposite of what it was to be “civilized”: to be uncontrived, to draw one’s music from nature, and have sophisticated percussion techniques. Even with as limited direct contact as the World’s Fair provided him, Debussy could deduce such knowledge of the lives of the Javanese performers, for he possessed, as a supplement to his limited contact with the musicians there, a battery of preconceptions about the binomial differences between “civilized” and “non-civilized” peoples.

Many parallels will be found among the three composers of this study. Though in his publications Cowell often described specific, geographically located musical traditions, he also frequently referred to both “primitive” and “Oriental” musics as broad classes, without any reference to actual temporally or geographically located persons or peoples,. “Primitives,” he noted for instance, did not make distinctions between speech and song,

whereas, of course, Westerners did.¹² It is most likely that in cases such as this Cowell's "primitives" were functions of his Westerners, derived through imaginative assumption about what would be the opposite of them: if Westerners differentiated between speech and song, primitives surely did not. "Orientals" then occupied a space along a continuum drawn between "moderns" and their "primitive" opposites. This form of thinking, apparent in many anthropological accounts of the "primitive"—in other words most anthropological writing prior to the rise of Boasian relativism, and many thereafter as well—has been described by Adam Kuper:

For [the anthropologists] modern society was defined above all by the territorial state, the monogamous family and private property. Primitive society therefore must have been nomadic, ordered by blood ties, sexually promiscuous and communist. . . . [Anthropologists] looked back in order to understand the nature of the present, on the assumption that modern society had evolved from its antithesis.¹³

Debussy's representation of the Javanese was more romanticized and less informed than were the representations by the three composers of this study, but in its structuring of antitheses it was the same. As will be seen, even after years of study in Bali, McPhee also constructed his representations of Balinese music so as to conform to certain pre-formed categories occupying the thinking of his composer colleagues, describing Balinese music as in many ways the antithesis of 19th-century European music: as non-expressive, as socially functional, as rhythmically complex, and as orchestrally lean. As mentioned, Cowell made primitivist statements similar to Debussy's, and developed ideas about "primitive" music based simply upon assumptions that it would be the

¹² This statement appears in Cowell's unpublished manuscript, *The Nature of Melody* (hereafter cited as *NOM*), Henry Cowell Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter cited as Cowell, Coll.).

¹³ Kuper, *The Invention*, 5.

opposite of “cultivated” music. Harrison’s views of Java were different from Debussy’s, far more informed by careful study of gamelan, but no less determined by what he saw Javanese music to *not* be.

As early as 1931, Charles Seeger noted the tendency among his modernist colleagues to create their own music through negation of conventional styles:

Most modern composition seems to restrict itself to a comparatively narrow variety of moods. In avoiding romantic sentiments, there has been little left except excitement, which is not an emotion or sentiment. . . In its abhorrence of the pretty, the sentimental, the self-pitying revelry, the exuberant optimism and subjectivism of romantic ardor, modern music has run almost entirely to the grotesque, the unsentimental, the merely exciting, and the almost inevitable pessimism of pure objectivity.¹⁴

To a great extent, American modernists not only forged self identity and compositional style through negation of “romantic sentiments,” “prettiness,” and so forth, but conceived of non-Western musics through a similar process of negation. They defined their bearers of “the truth about music” in contrast with European styles and particularly with Romanticism, for instance by representing them as rhythmically rather than harmonically complex, or as utterly inexpressive, out of contrast with the emotiveness of Romanticism.

This style of constructing the other through contrast from familiar cultural figurations served a double function. On the one hand, it provided the modernists with an image of the other from which they could easily draw influence by virtue of its very perfect dissimilarity from familiar musical style. The other was created on familiar terms through the simple inversion of its aspects. This constituted an enormously rich way of developing original material in a heartbeat, and offered a potent opportunity for modernists to think their way out of the hegemonic modes (not just musical ones). On the

¹⁴ Charles Seeger, *Tradition and Experiment in (the New Music)* in *Studies in Musicology II*, ed. Ann M. Pescatello (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 166.

other hand, this method of conceptualizing non-Western musics functioned to create a source of authority for the validation of the music modernists had already composed, even if it had not in fact been directly inspired by any non-Western image. These two tendencies went hand in hand, and their reciprocal relationship propelled some of the stylistic shift of the twentieth century. The modernist created the other in his own image, while fashioning himself after his imagined other.

This raises the question, whom did the modernist really imagine to be his other?¹⁵ Was it the non-Western person, or was it the other musician of his own society who was stuck in European styles of the 19th century, or in some other sense ignorant of the “truth about music” as it was apparent to the modernist himself? If the question is which was the object of the American modernist’s antipathy (at least as evidenced in his publications), then the answer is clearly the other Western musician. For instance, Boulez exhibited this attitude in the above quotation, for although he spoke dismissively about “Oriental musics,” his real adversary, the real other that he sought to intellectually dominate, was the Western composer who might look for false forms of inspiration in “Oriental musics.” The reality of “Oriental music” itself was only represented in order to win an argument that was internal to his own community of composers.¹⁶

¹⁵ I will occasionally use the pronoun *his* to refer to a general, non-specific modernist composer. I have chosen to do so as an acknowledgement that musical modernism was a largely male (an often masculinist) historical movement. Otherwise, in referring to members of mixed-gender populations I write *he/she*, *his/her*.

¹⁶ Born and Hesmondhalgh have made a similar though not identical argument about the modernist’s other being the popular culture of his/her own society: “...mass culture is modernism’s other in music as in the other arts, while references to ‘authentic’ folk and ethnic musics, primitive and exotic constructions, have remained more enduring and acceptable as forms of appropriation and projection in music” (*Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000], 16). They focus more upon “high modernism” than upon the “eclectic modernists” of this study. Though antipathy to popular music is apparent in the writings of these three composers, I have not found it to be nearly as recurrent a theme as antipathy to other styles of art music, particularly European ones.

A recurrent tendency of the composers of New Music—which will be seen again and again in the three studies that follow—was their taking exception to the prevailing musical norms as coercive and tiresome. The non-Western counterexample to these norms offered both the opportunity and the compulsion to innovate. As noted, it is not necessarily the case that one of these aspects preceded the other. The desire to innovate led the modernist to new investigations into the musics of others; meanwhile, investigations of the musics of other produced revelations that necessitated innovation.

In the effort to challenge Western hegemony modernists frequently found it imperative to go beyond merely introducing examples of alternative forms of music-making, and to make absolutist statements about music and humanity staked upon representations of such other musics. The other offered not merely another example of how music might be made, but was a key to a singular “truth about music” which modernists sought to ascertain, in much the same way that Foucault describes 19th-century scientists having sought the “truth about sex.”¹⁷ The tendency to seek the “truth about music” among modernists might be regarded as part of a larger intellectual holdover from the nineteenth-century. As Martin describes:

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ethnic researchers had gone into the field and into the libraries with many varied agendas and subagendas, but most usually with the ethnocentric assumption of objective expert authority and the propensity, in the standard style of nineteenth-century science, to steer their findings into the channels of universal truths about human nature and societies.¹⁸

¹⁷ The following quote from Foucault on the notion of “suppressed sexuality” as ripe with parallels in the modernist discourse on what might be called “suppressed musicality”: “The notion of repressed sex is not, therefore, only a theoretical matter. The affirmation of a sexuality that has never been more rigorously subjugated than during the age of the hypocritical, bustling, and responsible bourgeoisies is couple with the grandiloquence of a discourse purporting to reveal the truth about sex, modify its economy within reality, subvert the law that governs it, and change its future” (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 8. If one replaces the word “sex” with “music” one comes very close to a summary of the position common among modernist composer.

¹⁸ Martin, *The Languages*, 12.

Though modernists constantly advocated revolt from the cultural molds of the 19th-century, ironically their means toward their revolutionary ends were in this case retentions of the 19th-century scientific positivism. The methods and findings varied significantly, and yet the tendency to seek such “truths about music” through totalizing schemas was pervasive, and non-Western culture was one of the key objects of study toward that aim. This will be seen to be especially clear in the chapters on Cowell and Harrison that follow.

Modernist composers were usually only casual consumers of anthropological ideas. For this reason, there is little terminological unity evidenced within modernist publications when they refer to issues of cultural difference. I will use terms such as “primitive” and “exotic” in reference to particular threads of modernist thought, even though they were occasionally used differently by the modernists themselves. The term “primitive” is an important case in point, for while I have found relatively few uses of the term in modernist publications, and while primitivism is not often thought of as having been as significant a movement among early-20th-century composers as among visual artists, a great deal of the ideas about difference articulated by modernist composers implied evolutionist and primitivist styles of thought.¹⁹

For instance, McPhee was probably equivocal in his regard of the Balinese as “primitives,” and yet he often implied that the Balinese were the bearers of elemental human traits, which implied primitivism. When Cowell wrote about “Orientals” he was

¹⁹ On primitivism as a literary movement literature, see Michael Bell, *Primitivism* (London: Methuen and Co., 1972). Bell discusses the authorial aim to produce “primitive consciousness,” or “mythic consciousness,” connected closely with the notion of “primitive religion,” i.e. animism. I have not found these themes to have been important to the three composers I have studied, though they may have been significant to other modernist composers.

not speaking about the same category of humanity as “primitives,” and yet he was referring to an evolutionary schema that implied the existence of “primitives” as a category less developed than “Orientals.” Furthermore, Cowell sometimes decried the term “primitive” as condescending, while in the same utterance affirming that there were categories of humanity ranging from least to most advanced (even at the point when Cowell lost his taste for the word “primitive,” he continued to refer to a least advanced stage of human cultural development, the notion of which would have popularly been called “primitives,” “barbarians,” or “savages”). Harrison did not much refer to “primitives,” but he did remark that there were “primitives.” His own interests were in “cultivated Oriental” peoples, a category which took definition in contrast from “primitive” peoples (Harrison probably was most influenced by Cowell in his understanding of differences between “primitive” and “cultivated” peoples).

The objective of modernists in this regard was most often counter-institutional, in so far as their findings about musical “truths” were articulated as challenges to what they saw as the hegemonic order. As far as this goes these modernists might be regarded as “relativists,” for non-Western musics were important to them in the critique of absolutisms in contemporary currency. None of these ethnographer/composers, however, were epistemological relativists. They did not maintain that knowledge was ultimately relative to culture, and that universals were actually ethnocentrisms. Each of them held absolutist views on the “truth about music.” I will discuss the subtlety of this distinction at length in regard to Cowell, who in spite of and indeed because of his positivistic style of inquiry was a bearer of current relativist ideals of tolerance and pluralism.

Both the non-Western other and the mainstream Western other were constructions of the modernist imagination. I wish to emphasize that for the purposes of this study what I am explicating and critiquing is the non-West only in terms of its existence in the minds of modernists. I am not, in the following criticisms of the images of difference held by Colin McPhee, Henry Cowell, and Lou Harrison, attempting to clear away their “misunderstandings” so that the correct “understandings” may emerge. I reiterate that if the identity of the non-Western other, of the mainstream other, and of the modernist himself were all constructions, this is not to say any was simply a fantasy. As noted, many modernists expended a great deal of effort in their studies of non-Western musical practices, the three that I focus on being particularly notable examples, and their representations continue to be compelling in many regards. If, for the purposes of this study, the other ultimately only existed as images in the mind of these composers, this is not to say that these were images uninformed by careful study and even interaction.

It is also important to emphasize that, though at moments in this study I will describe a particular representation of the other having given rise to a particular style, or a particular stylistic concern having given shape to the representation of the other, ultimately none of these factors should be understood to have preceded the other two. The modernist’s conception of his mainstream other was continuously reinvented with his shifting conception of the non-Western other. His self-conception was continuously reborn in opposition to his shifting conception of his mainstream opponent. His non-Western person or peoples were continuously re-imagined as correlates to his shifting concept of self. This process of reciprocation is discussed in greater concreteness in the Chapter on McPhee.

Even in cases, such as that described by Kuper above, in which the attributes of “primitives” seem to have been invented purely by calculating the antitheses to the attributes of “civilization,” there is still the question of how and why certain attributes of civilization became problematized in the first place. How did Kuper’s anthropologists come to reflect on there being anything peculiar about their territorial states, monogamous families, and private properties? It was only by encountering, at some historical moment, that which seemed to be startlingly non-territorial, non-monogamous, non-private, and hence non-civilized. Similarly, modernist composers’ problematizations of Western musical norms were the result of modernist engagements with difference in some form. Constructions of difference as a world-wide phenomenon meanwhile fell into shape along the ideological fault lines of contemporary Western discourse. Neither came prior to the other.

Similitude as a Key to Hybrid Composition

If so far I have emphasized the importance of dichotomization in the imagining of difference by modernist composers, I have done so to a great extent in order to point to the most important compositional technique that modernist composers employed in their compositional engagements with difference. This was the flip-side of the construction of difference: the construction of sameness, or, as I will call it, “similitude.” The construction of similitude was most precisely a strategy of constructing knowledge of foreign musics in a manner by which those musics could become sources of influence. Similitudes were those features of music that could be said to be both “theirs” and “ours,” and were so, demonstrably, because within a binaristic framework they were *not* a third party’s.

This strategy can be found in use by the three composers I have studied, in spite of their varied compositional styles and ideas about difference. In his 1935 article “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali,”²⁰ McPhee described Balinese music on terms so familiar to the members of his milieu that the word “Balinese” might have been substituted with “modern” with little resulting incongruence. He generated these similitudes by dichotomizing Balinese music with Romanticism. Balinese music was *not* made of amorphous masses of orchestral sound, was *not* performed in concert halls, was *not* guilty of hyper-emotional oozing, and was *not* harmonically overloaded. In all these regards, it resembled various new ideas of modernist music, and in some of these respects it resembled McPhee’s own composition *Tabuh-tabuhan*, which was a Bali-inspired work. (He did not give these similitudes explicit statement; rather I interpret them as ethnographic allegory in the sense described by Clifford, see below.) For *Tabuh-tabuhan* this meant that McPhee composed each passage so as to speak in the very same “breath” and in the very same “utterances” about Balinese music and about modernist music. This unit of similitude, in which two voices speaking two distinct languages were heard within a single breath, corresponds to what Bakhtin calls the “intentional hybrid.”²¹

Similitude becomes salient in my analysis of Cowell’s *United Quartet* (1936) at two levels. First, Cowell created similitude in the construction of categories of human music-

²⁰ McPhee, “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali,” *Modern Music* 12 (May-June 1935): 163-69.

²¹ Mikhael Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), 259-422. “What we are calling a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two ‘languages,’ two semantic and axiological belief systems.... It frequently happens that even one and the same word will belong simultaneously to two languages, two belief systems that intersect in a hybrid construction—and consequently, the word has two contradictory meanings, two accents” (304-305). I had originally intended this Bakhtinian sort of similitude to be the organizing concept of this project. I have found, however, that I had to conceive of similitude differently with Cowell and with Harrison, and so the concept has lost its centrality.

making. With these categories he subsumed various musical traditions into units of sameness: “primitive,” “Oriental,” “archaic” and “classic” musics, along with other categories that together encompassed all of human musicianship (spanning back throughout the history of humanity). Second, he created similitude in the “uniting” of the features of these various categories of humanity, based upon certain “elemental” bases that he viewed as transcending all of these ethnic/historical divisions. The result was a work that Cowell not only claimed to be universal, in the sense that it was based upon musical features so fundamental as to be shared by every human musician, but comprehensively human, in the sense that it represented aspects of every category of human music throughout history.

Harrison’s approach to constructing similitudes was also dependent upon the perception of the sameness of various distant traditions—unifying, for instance, the music of Indonesia, Ancient Greece, and the modernist composer Harry Partch—by understanding them to be in antithesis from others—those employing the tuning system of equal temperament. Harrison, however, went much further than McPhee in imagining the world, in very many aspects, to be lined up entirely into two forces of opposition, one good and one bad. On the one side were the forces of reason, exemplified by Asia, Greece, and certain modernists, and on the other hand were those of absurdity, exemplified by dominant urban styles of music making and life. He associated reasonable phenomena, differentiated them from absurd phenomena, which he then associated with each other and differentiated from reasoned ones, and so forth. In the end a tremendous amount of knowledge of the world—his “reality”—was coordinated within a single dualistic framework: the good half he celebrated and the bad half he deplored.

Compositionally, this style of associating and differentiating yielded certain trans-national conceptions of musical materials, which then permitted their combination as simple workings out of what was “really the same” as it in fact existed in the world. I discuss the relevance of this compositional method to Harrison’s Double Concerto for Violin, Cello, and Javanese Gamelan.

The three composers that I have examined have turned out to have only limited commonalities in terms of their views on difference, and this was in spite of their close personal relationships. The more closely I have examined each, the more their dissimilarities in their most fundamental terms of thinking about cultural difference have become apparent. Certainly not one of them was content merely to work in the mold of another. Still, each of them focused heavily upon differences and similitudes, and for each this style of thinking was critical to his style of composing. This fact alone offers argument for considering these three composers as of a single meaningful cultural movement called *modernism*. I discuss the conception of modernism arrived at through this study further in this introduction.

Contemporary Paradigms of Constructing Difference

Among intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century, it was commonly believed that there were “primitives,” peoples who might have existed on various spots on the globe, persisting in more-or-less the same state as more “civilized” societies had in their own very distant past.²² Such notions as there being an “primitive” form of society based upon certain kinship structures, a “primitive” religion which was animism, closely

²² See Kuper, *The Invention*.

tied to “primitive” consciousness (mythic consciousness), and other “primitive” cultural forms were commonplace and served as the foundation of inquiry in a variety of fields.

But, as Adam Kuper has pointed out, this long-lasting and pervasive surety about the existence of “primitive society” was a delusion:

The rapid establishment and the endurance of a theory is not particularly remarkable if the theory is substantially correct. But hardly any anthropologist today would accept that this classic account of primitive society can be sustained. On the contrary, the orthodox modern view is that there never was such a thing as “primitive society.” Certainly, no such thing can be reconstructed now. There is not even a sensible way in which one can specify what a “primitive’ society” is. The term implies some historical point of reference. It presumably defines a type of society ancestral to more advanced forms, on the analogy of an evolutionary history of some natural species. But human societies cannot be traced back to a single point of origin, and there is no way of reconstituting prehistoric social forms, classifying them, and aligning them in a time series. There are no fossils of social organization.²³

And he continues:

The persistence of the model is particularly problematic since various of its basic assumptions were quite directly contradicted by ethnographic evidence and by the logic of evolutionary theory itself. The difficulties were clearly stated by some of the leading scholars in the field (notably Westermarck, Boas, and Malinowski). Notwithstanding, social anthropologists busied themselves for over a hundred years with the manipulation of a fantasy... (p. 8)

Given the commonness of the belief among highly respected thinkers in the existence of various “primitive” cultural forms, it is not surprising that many composers and music theorists assumed that there must be some particular sort of music possessed by “primitive” peoples all over the world. Even if the notion of “primitive” music was untenable in light of the data available (and arguments launched in 1911 by Franz

²³ Kuper, *The Invention*, 7.

Boas²⁴), all three of the composers of my study, to one extent or another, worked under its sway, as did most of their colleagues.

Primitivism, a reversal of more commonplace styles of evolutionist thinking that found value in “primitive” cultural forms (rather than regarding them as inferior to the products of “civilization”), was common among artists and intellectuals in the early twentieth century. Rather than viewing “primitives” as crude and barbaric, primitivists saw them as more in touch with the fundamental aspects of human existence. Yet primitivism only reversed the assignment of value in the evolutionist view of culture, and in other respects maintained the ethnocentrism inherent to it. In the primitivist view, the history of all the world’s peoples was still a single march of culture, with Western culture having traveled the furthest.

The only question was whether it was better to be where “we” (as civilized people) were, or to be where “we” had come from. In the evolutionist view, *culture* was not something possessed uniquely by each group of people, but was singular and was accumulated, with Euro-American society possessing it in the greatest degree. I use the term *primitivism* exclusively in this sense, as an ideology that assumed the existence of “primitives” in the contemporary sense grounded in cultural evolutionist theory, and not in reference to other ideologies of valuation of long-past peoples living in simpler states. Therefore I will not use the word *primitivism* to describe Harrison’s interest in Chinese, Korean, and Javanese musics, because he did not regard these groups as “primitive” nor did his conception of their significance have to do with a belief in unilinear evolution. He did, however, share with primitivists the idea that non-Western peoples existed in a state

²⁴ Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1911). In my understanding of the extent of Boas’s critique of received ideas on race and evolution, I rely upon Martin, *The Languages*; Stocking, *Race, Culture, Evolution*; and Kuper, *The Invention*.

that was more fundamentally and “naturally” human, and that it is desirable for moderns to “regain” certain of those peoples’ attributes. I do use the term *primitivist* in connection with McPhee and Cowell.

Sigmund Freud’s ideas on difference provide a useful parallel to the primitivist thinking among some composers. Though Freud was not an anthropologist, he was highly concerned with anthropology because its concept of the “primitive” represented a key to his own endeavors in the field of psychology. The “primitive” was essential man, possessing the essential psychology of man (which Freud also found that his hysterical patients possessed). He held the evolutionist view that civilization had advanced out of “primitive” states, and yet, as Martin describes, Freud did not imagine that in “civilized society” the irrational and savage aspects of the psyche had been conquered. “We” had never ceased being “primitives”:

We live in the presence of in the presence of our ultimate ancestors’ urges and deeds and we always will. Our understandings and institutions might differ from those of primitive peoples, but our psychological and moral makeup is a continuing heritage.²⁵

Martin describes how, unlike other evolutionists who imagined that civilization came about through the “triumph of knowledge over ignorance, of reason over superstition,” for Freud civilization arose to a large extent by “the suppression of instincts” (p. 119). This attitude characterizes a great deal of modernist speculation about difference: that there were musical instincts possessed and acted upon by non-Western peoples that were merely suppressed in “our” own society. The modernist composers that I study do not seem to have been greatly influenced by Freud, yet it was not necessary to have been

²⁵ Martin, *The Languages*, 119. Martin primarily discusses the primitivism of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. A. A. Brill. (New York: Moffat, Yard, 1918).

directly influenced by Freud in order to sympathize with his regard of “primitives” as a key to understanding human nature and the “truth about music.”²⁶

Mark Slobin has remarked that, for much of the twentieth century the idea of the “primitive” was one of three fundamental categories used in the study of non-Western musics, along with “Oriental” and “folk”:

The study of world musics moved out of what would nowadays be called an Orientalist stance only in the 1960s. Till then, few people seriously questioned the notion that beyond the Western classical tradition there were three kinds of music to be studied: Oriental, folk, and primitive. This triad underlaid many works and was implicit in the training of my generation of researchers. “Oriental” of course referred to those Asian “high cultures” that had long-term, accessible internal histories and that could be “compared” with similar European systems. “Primitive” encompassed all the “preliterate” peoples of the world, who had to rely on oral tradition for transmission and who had no highly professionalized “art musicians” in their midst. The “folk” were the internal primitives of Euro-America.²⁷

These categories pervading the thinking of early ethnomusicology were held by McPhee, Cowell, and Harrison. Cowell, who was perhaps the most informed on theories of difference in the social sciences broadly, kept particular stock in these three categories. In Chapter 3 I will discuss in detail the use he made of them.

Not all of the modernist composers who expressed primitivist views would have subscribed to cultural evolutionism in full form. Many were not interested in developing full fledged and consistent theories of culture, but only in referencing concepts such as “the primitive” in a more casual way. None was beholden to any schema of organized

²⁶ Of the three composers discussed in this dissertation, McPhee was the most in sympathy with Freudian ideas, perhaps due to the influence of his wife Jane Belo, an anthropologist with Freudian leanings, and his close association with Margaret Mead, who, though not precisely a Freudian, frequently made observations about human psychology through her anthropological work. I have not found any of the three composers central to this dissertation to have spoken at length in psychoanalytical terms, and Harrison’s rationalist epistemology all but excluded entirely psychoanalytical interests in the subconscious and irrational.

²⁷ Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1993), 4.

understanding of human difference. Though I will describe in each chapter a single conception of difference possessed by each composer, in actuality what I point to in each case were merely recurring styles of thought, not philosophies which they followed with perfect consistency. Like most modernist composers, McPhee, Cowell, and Harrison read eclectically and their ideas neither fell squarely along the lines of a particular established paradigm nor were perfectly integrated. Like other modernists they were capable of valuing “primitive” or “Oriental” culture at one moment, and holding up the value of the modern civilized world at the next, as it suited their various agendas and appeared to be sensible given the evidence they possessed.

Though the terms “primitive” and “primitivism” were employed by modernist composers, they were not used with great consistency. It was sometimes the case that other words, such as “exotic,” were used, even while the ideas expressed were distinctly primitivist. I have attempted to use such terms with greater consistency than they received in the modernist writings I analyze. The result may be some discrepancy between my own use of terms and their use in the quotations of modernist composers I provide.

The composers that I study were either just as interested in the musics of “Orientals” as they were of “primitives,” or were all but exclusively interested in “Orientals.” Nevertheless, I have given a great deal of attention to primitivist notions, because they are a key to understanding how these composers conceived of “Orientals.” John Corbett has described the relationship between these two concepts in the minds of experimentalist composers:

Already, right at the outset of the proverbial golden years of American experimentalism, a familiar nineteenth-century form of Orientalism helps guide

an overriding interest in non-Western music: “Oriental” music is linked, at least by persistent proximity, with the “primitive,” and both are looked to for their rejuvenative powers in a period of mounting dissatisfaction with conventional Western musical civilization.²⁸

Cowell often spoke of “primitives” and “Orientals” together, not because he regarded them as the same, but because they were conceptually linked: “primitives” represented the stage of human evolution at its origins, while “Orientals” represented a stage of evolution that was higher than that of “primitives”—Oriental music, like Western music, was “cultivated”—but lower than that of Euro-Americans (actually Cowell objected to the words “higher” and “lower” in this context because of their Eurocentric connotation, but he nevertheless maintained a unilinear understanding of human societies’ evolution that implied higher and lower degrees of evolution). To the extent that Harrison’s thinking about non-Western musics was organized within these categories, he was all but exclusively interested in “Orientals,” not in “primitives.”

Although there seems to be an unavoidable degree of arrogance attendant with cultural evolutionism, holding as it did that all societies were engaged in a march of progress inevitably directed to the state of advancement of Euro-American society (and implying, at the very least, that modern people were the only ones qualified to claim the wisdom of hindsight upon the history of humanity and foresight into its future), not all evolutionist arguments carried an equal degree of condescension. The phenomenon of primitivism attests to this variance, for it held that the evolution away from more emergent states of humanity had in fact been a decline, and not an achievement.

²⁸ John Corbett, “Experimental Oriental: New Music and other Others,” in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000), 167.

The dominant philosophy of anthropology in the twentieth century has perhaps been cultural relativism, which is often described as having supplanted cultural evolutionism. I discuss cultural relativism in both the chapter on Cowell and again more fully in the chapter on Harrison. The principle as I define it in that latter chapter may, again, not be exactly the same as usages of the term found elsewhere. I had originally sought a standard meaning of cultural relativism with which to frame the argument of that section, but found that the meaning has varied in different corners of the field and has been the subject of debate. It is also inevitably the case that explicit articulations of a philosophy for the purposes of methodological orientation for a field and the actual ways that researchers carry out their inquiries do not match perfectly. I have opted to define the term myself in a manner that reflects the intellectual trends that I have observed in Ethnomusicology. In regards to the non-unity of cultural relativism as a philosophy of difference, see Alison Dundes Renteln.²⁹ Renteln argues that the principle has been poorly articulated by both its advocates and opponents, and that the result has been much unnecessary argument over the theory's merits.³⁰

²⁹ Renteln, "Relativism and the Search for Human Rights," *American Anthropologist* 90, no. 1 (March 1988): 56-72.

³⁰ For a sample from the debate on cultural relativism in the 1950s, see Frank E. Hartung, "Cultural Relativity and Moral Judgments," *Philosophy of Science* 21, no. 2 (April 1954): 118-126; and Herskovits's defenses of the theory "Tender- and Tough-Minded Anthropology and the Study of Values in Culture," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 7 (1951): 22-31; and "Some Further Comments on Cultural Relativism," *American Anthropologist* 60, no. 2 (April 1958): 266-273. Some more recent discussions include Wilcomb, E. Washburn, "Cultural Relativism, Human Rights, and the AAA," *American Anthropologist* 89, no. 4 (December 1987): 939-943; James W. Fernandez, "Tolerance in a Repugnant World and other Dilemmas in the Cultural Relativism of Melville J. Herskovits," *Ethos* 18, no. 2 (June 1990): 140-164; Amy Gutmann, "The Challenge of Multiculturalism in Political Ethics," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 171-206; and William Max Knorr, Jr., "What Relativism Isn't," *Philosophy* 73, no. 284 (April 1998): 277-300. Both Kuper, *The Invention*, and Martin, *The Languages*, include discussions of relativism as it represented an early critique of cultural evolution by Boas and his students.

Issues in this Project's Assemblage

Although I hope for this dissertation to contribute to a general historical picture of ideologies of cultural difference held in the modernist composers' community, I have approached the question through detailed and focused studies of only three composers. The obvious disadvantage of this approach is that focus upon three composers cannot go very far in yielding a broad picture of the movement, and I freely admit that ideas of difference and their significance to composition among 20th-century composers were far more diverse than that which is represented in this dissertation. It is because of this very fact of the intense internal diversity within the modernist movement that I have found it necessary to focus upon three composers in such depth. Each of them possessed quite idiosyncratic ideas on difference that only have come into full light through detailed consideration of a broad selection of their publications. In studying a movement of individuals who were eager not to reproduce conventional modes of thought—or even those of their closest colleagues—I have found it essential to proceed from a careful consideration of individual cases in order to produce worthy historical generalizations. At the same time, these individuals were certainly not islands, and in each chapter I offer comparisons between the ideas of the focus composer and those of some of his closest colleagues.

The three composers that I picked for focused analysis each gave cultural difference (and non-difference) an especially central place in his compositional and theoretical endeavors. There were others who did the same, and whom I might also have chosen. I hope in a future version of this project to include more modernist voices in my analysis. I selected Cowell because he was central to so many of the activities of American

modernists, especially as they related to the study of cultural difference. I selected McPhee and Harrison because each of them made special study of Indonesian musics (Balinese and Javanese respectively) and, as I have myself been conducting fieldwork in Indonesia since 2002, I felt well equipped to study them.³¹ Since we share a field, I have found that I have been able to come particularly quickly to a critical perspective upon their representations of Balinese and Javanese musical culture. Strictly speaking, however, my critical study does not rely upon my first-hand experiences in Indonesia. I do not “correct” McPhee or Harrison’s representations of Indonesia based upon my own understandings of Indonesian musical culture, but rather critique their arguments based on features immanent to them and contrast their representations with others produced by scholars working in other milieus, guided by other methods and interests. In the end, the only population that this dissertation seeks to represent is that of modernist composers, not Indonesians.

The study on McPhee addresses textual issues of his ethnographic writing and relates them to his composition *Tabuh-tabuhan*; the two studies on Cowell and Harrison are meanwhile mostly concerned with epistemological issues. This disunity has arisen because of these composers’ different writing styles and research styles—McPhee was the only one of the three to engage in extensive field research. McPhee’s publications about Bali have limited unity in tone and content, perhaps because they were spread out in time (his first came in 1935, while his most significant ethnographic work, *Music in Bali*, was only released posthumously in 1966, long after his fieldwork had been concluded). Cowell, meanwhile, wrote more prolifically—and it seems less self-

³¹ I lived in Indonesia in the summers of 2002, 2003, and 2005, and for a ten-month period in 2007 with financial assistance from Fulbright-Hays. In my current field research I am interested in the use of music in Javanese mystical movements.

consciously—and the result is many texts that together contribute to a big picture of his ideas on musical difference. I have therefore focused upon textual issues of discreet discursive acts in McPhee’s case, and have developed exegeses of epistemological matters as evidenced across texts for Cowell and Harrison.

My discussion of Colin McPhee is an examination of his ethnographic writing, and of how the same issues become relevant to his “ethnographic composition.” By the latter, I mean a composition that aims to represent musical materials that are foreign to its intended audience. The ethnographic composition, like conventionally conceived musical ethnography (a book about foreign music), presents the audience with documentations of the foreign music and implies, even when it does not articulate explicitly, interpretations of the nature of what it shares with and how it differs from the audience’s own music. The represented materials of an ethnographic composition, not being precise documentations of foreign sounds as a field recording would be, present a series of statements about what the foreign music most essentially “is.” I discuss McPhee’s ethnographic composition *Tabuh-tabuhan* as an encounter with difference in which that which was represented was ultimately compelled—for the sake of coherence and appeal—to speak on terms familiar to its audience. It was an allegory in the sense that although it most explicitly spoke about one thing (Balinese music), it at the same time represented something else unstated (modernism). That which was represented, then, far from appearing to the audience as a novel object for neutral apprehension, inevitably appeared in the forms of the audience’s own familiarity, and spoke to their own particular concerns.

I draw this concept of ethnographic allegory from James Clifford, who describes how in ethnography the constructed image of the other and the other's manners of making meaning are unveiled, "seen" and "heard," in a continuing structure of metaphors between what the reader presumes to be the meanings belonging to the other and the meanings that had articulated themselves to the reader prior to his/her opening of the book: "What appears descriptively to the senses... seems to be 'other,' while what is suggested by the coherent series of perceptions is an underlying similitude."³² Even if the ethnographer were to offer no parallel structure by which the other was to be regarded, Clifford argues that, in the interest of coherence, an allegorical frame would be constructed by the reader. "Even scientific ethnographers cannot fully control the meanings—readings—provoked by their accounts" (p. 110). Such parallels are the terms on which the meaningfulness of ethnographic accounts is contingent.

As noted, the materials available for both Harrison and Cowell were such that in each case periods of marked consistency could be observed in their voices as they articulated views on cultural difference—even in periods when they composed with a variety of voices. For that reason, my analyses of those two composer/ethnographers have been concerned with the exegesis of theoretical stances that come into full focus through examination of multiple writings. Rather than focusing on the dynamics of a single utterance, as I did with McPhee, I focus in the chapters on Harrison and Cowell on the tendencies of thought that permitted a variety of statements about the cultural other and which provided the means of drawing compositional influence from the cultural other.

³² James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in *Writing Culture*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), 101.

As I have already mentioned, I argue that an overarching dualism informed Harrison's understanding of cultural difference and can be heard in his compositions—through the generation of materials in opposition to certain undesirable forms of musicality, such as equal temperament. Meanwhile, Cowell's views on difference idiosyncratically combined three styles of conceiving of difference: scientific positivism, cultural evolutionism, and cultural relativism. I have discussed the latter two in the previous subsection of this introduction. By positivism, I mean that Cowell understood there to be inherent features of music, transcendent of culture. While Cowell respected that the world's peoples' musics differed in many significant respects, he saw difference as only descending to a certain depth, below which was a fundamental level at which any music could be studied with the same scientific apparatus. This basic level, music's "elements," offered a unifying foundation for his inquiry by which Eurocentrism could be dispelled and upon which all musics could be championed as equally valid. This was relativistic in spirit, but epistemologically speaking was not "cultural relativism" as it is generally defined today.

My analyses of the compositions of these three modernists are somewhat idiosyncratic. In each case, I have prioritized analysis of the composer's verbally articulated views on difference, and then developed musical analyses that expose how each made notes accomplish the same thing as words. Beyond this, there has been no overarching music analytical method, because, just as I have allowed the writings of each composer to determine what was significant to say about them as writers, I have done the same for them as composers. I have discussed how McPhee's orchestral work *Tabuh-tabuhan* acted as ethnographic allegory, in the sense described by James Clifford. With Cowell and Harrison I have discussed how the same epistemological issues that were

structural to their written statements about cultural difference and non-difference were present in and structural to their compositions.

There are certain themes which I have not taken up but might have, and it is worth mentioning those now. One is race. This study, though it is concerned with cultural difference on a worldwide scale, does not touch upon issues of race because those were not explicitly touched upon by these composers in their writings. Racialism was one common component of anthropological thinking in the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century as well, and in some cases cultural evolutionist theories went hand-in-hand with racist ones. The composers I have studied, in so far as they subscribed to cultural-evolutionist theories, did not suggest that differences in culture were due to differences in biology, but rather subscribed to what Martin calls the “civilization paradigm”:

Certainly this [civilization] paradigm, too, was hierarchical, but it did not involve marking any peoples as absolutely, hereditarily inferior, but only as to some degree and for some reason—climatic or historical, say—slower in their development as a society.”³³

The composers of this study seem to have believed in the biological unity of humanity, to have been anti-racist, or not to have considered race an issue worth stressing. The absence of explicit racism is not, however, an indication of pure colorblindness. Cowell must have conceived of his “Orientals” as having darker skin than he did, and his “primitives”—as they happened to exist in Africa, Australia, and wherever else—as being darker still. Yet he articulated no reason why this should necessarily be so. If a study of ideas of race among these American modernists were undertaken, it would require different methods from the ones I have used.

³³ Martin, *The Languages of Difference*, 23.

The relationship of sexuality (particularly homosexuality) and interest in non-Western musics among modernist composers is another issue that I might have pursued. Each of these three composers had sexual relationships with other men, either partially or exclusively, as did many 20th-century American composers that were interested in non-Western musics. I regret that I cannot offer any explanation for the overwhelming gayness of this historical phenomenon. Rather than offer crude interpretations of something so complex, I have opted to leave the issue to other scholars, able to offer the issue the focused study and finesse that it deserves. As a start, for those interested in this line of inquiry, I refer the reader to Nadine Hubbs's thoughtful *The Queer Composition of America's Sound*,³⁴ which focuses on the gay community surrounding Virgil Thompson and Aaron Copland.

My aim in this introduction has been to offer the reader a sense of what all three studies of the following studies point to about modernist styles of engaging with difference. The fact that all three follow address different though related concerns has arisen because, after some struggle, I have relented to allow the materials I have accessed on each study to give me their forms and themes, rather than the reverse. I have had to ignore less than I would had I asked all the materials to speak to the same concerns, and so I hope that the result is studies that are both more incisive and less reductive.

³⁴ *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2004).

Chapter II: Colin McPhee and “The Absolute Music of Bali”

“From a musician’s viewpoint the island of Bali is the legendary *isle joyeuse*.”

Colin McPhee, 1935

During the 1920s and ‘30s American composers were becoming increasingly interested in foreign musics. Many hoped that the closer examination of such musics and their incorporation into a new modern music would lead composers away from the influence of Western Europe, and toward a music that was at once more confidently American and more deeply human. Toward this aim, both nationalist and universalist, the musics of “primitive” peoples from all parts of the earth (not just those indigenous to the U.S.) were of interest. “Primitives” were understood to be in touch with those “first principles” of music making that had become obscured in the European classical music tradition, especially that of the nineteenth century.

Perhaps no American composer of that era could claim to have made as careful and prolonged a study of a foreign music as Colin McPhee. McPhee lived on the island of Bali (in modern Indonesia) for much of the decade of the 1930s, and intermittently during and his time there wrote articles, compositions, transcriptions, and lectures introducing Balinese music to Western audiences. His first profession was composition, but his

ethnographic publications, particularly the encyclopedic *Music in Bali*³⁵ (posthumous, 1966), ultimately received the greatest recognition. Upon *Music in Bali*'s publication the ethnomusicologist Judith Becker reviewed it as "one of the most carefully written, complete and precise descriptions of any musical style outside the Western world."³⁶ McPhee's memoirs *A House in Bali* (1946) gave a rich, non-technical description of Balinese life, and as such may also be considered an ethnographic work. As I will discuss, it was widely read and received excellent critical reviews.

McPhee's most well known composition is probably *Tabuh-tabuhan*, scored for two pianos and orchestra and saturated with Balinese musical ideas.³⁷ He wrote it on a return visit to the West in 1935-36. Although McPhee was please with its premier performance in Mexico City (conducted by Carlos Chávez), he subsequently suffered disappointment by failing to procure a U.S. premier: the work was hear on U.S. radio in 1948 and the first U.S. concert performance did not occur until 1953. The discouragement all but ended McPhee's compositional career, and yet *Tabuh-tabuhan* has been much admired by some, in part as a sort of compositional ethnography. Reviewing the 1948 radio performance, Henry Cowell remarked: "No Western composer has probably ever known the music of another culture so thoroughly as McPhee does the Indonesian, so that when

³⁵ McPhee's three books are *A House in Bali* (New York: The John Day Company, 1946) (hereafter cited as *HIB*), his memoir of life in Bali during the 1930s; *A Club for Small Men* (New York: The John Day Company, 1948), a children's book describing his forming of a musical club for the children of his Balinese village; and *Music in Bali* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), his largest project, a detailed description of Balinese music with transcriptions of several Balinese musical genres.

³⁶ Judith Becker, review of *Music in Bali*, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 21(Fall 1968): 404.

³⁷ *Tabuh-tabuhan* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, Inc., 1960).

he writes in this style he is able to retain the characteristics that are most important to Indonesian culture and at the same time most attractive to us.”³⁸

My concern in this chapter is with how McPhee crafted some of the earliest compositions and texts so as to make Balinese music comprehensible and indeed interesting to his American audiences. In the following section I will discuss how the success of McPhee’s memoir *A House in Bali* is attributable in part to his skillful use of two authorial techniques: omission and metaphor. Omission is the technique whereby the author, particularly the author of ethnography, excludes from the text that information that would be unlikely to be meaningful or appealing to his intended audience. Metaphor in this context (connected to Clifford’s concept of “ethnographic allegory”, which I discuss in the Introduction) is the technique whereby an author presents information foreign to his/her audience in a way that will make it seem to be the same as that which the audience already knows.

Following the discussion of McPhee’s handling of omission and metaphor, and the success they earned for *A House in Bali*, I turn to the questions of how and why composers of new music in the U.S. early in McPhee’s career were interested in non-Western musics. I argue that the terms by which modernist composers of the time were prepared to and interested in engaging with non-Western music determined the way McPhee chose—or was compelled—to shape his representations of Balinese music. The remainder of this chapter will then be devoted to a consideration of two of McPhee’s earliest representations of Balinese music, the 1935 article published in *Modern Music*

³⁸ Henry Cowell, “Current Cronicle,” *The Musical Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (July 1948): 410-411, 405-429.

“The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali”³⁹ and *Tabuh-tabuhan*.⁴⁰ Taking Cowell’s statement that in *Tabuh-tabuhan* McPhee had retained the characteristics of Indonesian culture “most valuable to us” as telling, I discuss the many ways in which these two representations were, in their content and form, fitted for reception in the modernist community. I argue that what those representations said—and indeed *could* say—about Balinese music was determined to a great extent by what American composers were already thinking about “primitives,” Europeans, and themselves. The techniques of omission and metaphor, which can be considered as compositional as well as authorial, were both crucial for the construction of coherent representations of Bali on these terms.

As McPhee produced a relatively small body of compositions and writings, which are quite spread out over his career, my analytical approach is different in this chapter than it will be in the chapters on Cowell and Harrison. Whereas for the latter composers exegeses of coherence in their long-term outlooks could be developed, for McPhee I have focused on the rhetoric he employed in two productive moments in his career, starting in 1946 with the publication of *A House in Bali* and then moving back to 1935-36 with the publication “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali” and the performance of *Tabuh-tabuhan*. McPhee’s voice, unlike Cowell’s and especially unlike Harrison’s, shifted considerably over his career and depending on his intended audience, making it difficult to draw out unifying terms of coherence.

³⁹ “The Absolute Music of Bali,” *Modern Music* 12 (May-June 1935): 163-69 (hereafter cited as *AMB*).

⁴⁰ Richard Mueller has produced a significant study of *Tabuh-tabuhan*. See his “Bali, *Tabuh-Tabuhan*, and Colin McPhee’s Method of Intercultural Composition, *The Journal of Musicological Research*, part 1: 10, no. 3-4 (1991): 127-75; part 2: 11, no. 1-2 (1991): 67-92. Also see his “Imitation and Stylization in the Balinese Music of Colin McPhee,” Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Chicago, 1983.

Omission and Metaphor in *A House in Bali*

A House in Bali tells the story of McPhee's life on the island, which spanned the years 1931 to 1939. It was at once memoir and ethnography: a narrative conveying events in temporal order and confining the story to McPhee's personal experiences, it nevertheless directed the reader's attention toward McPhee's Balinese acquaintances and their music, not toward McPhee himself.⁴¹ Its reviewers were astonished with McPhee's success at conveying an unmediated, physical experience of life in Bali (both his own experience and, notably, that of the Balinese!), but, as I will argue, the book was in fact carefully crafted so as to convey such immediate experiences via imagery that was already familiar to McPhee's readership. The apparent universality of the description was thus actually a skillful mediation, directed at a particular, historically contingent readership.

In light of some of the evidence I raise, it will be seen that aspects of McPhee's story were distorted by the omission of information: in particular the omission of the fact that he had a wife (the anthropologist Jane Belo) and that he lived among a community of Western intellectuals that included the anthropologist Margaret Mead and the painter and poet Walter Spies. Yet, as a fact of memoir writing omission is par for the course. I do not note these few omissions to correct the story, to provide the crucial details so that the "true" story can come to light, but rather raise them in the course of arguing that the art of memoir writing is necessarily one of fishing from an ocean of memories a very few details to include. The only "true" story would be the impossible narrative organization of

⁴¹ Throughout this chapter and particularly in this discussion of *A House in Bali* I rely heavily upon Carol Oja's biography, *Colin McPhee: Composer in Two Worlds* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990) (hereafter cited as *CTW*).

that vast continuum of experience that was left behind. As does any personal recollection, *A House in Bali* presents only a partial account of all that really transpired, and yet, the potency of *A House in Bali*, its ability to communicate convincingly and pleasurably about its subjects, rests precisely in its design by omission.

For ethnography, which involves describing people and locations that are utterly foreign to one's readership, omission is the first necessary step that permits the other essential technique, metaphor. A metaphor in this case refers to the literary device whereby the ethnographer renders something for his/her reader belonging to the studied subject (e.g. a concept, perceived object, remembered experience) in terms that the ethnographer suggests correspond to something from the reader's vocabulary. Metaphor can be understood theoretically as a feature of all ethnography, as inherent to the art of communicating a physical world that is totally unknown. McPhee's reviewers praised his ability to render in words the physical sensation of being in Bali through direct appeal to the universal senses: I suggest that McPhee's success in this regard can be understood in terms of his deftness with ethnographic metaphor. While he seemed to have created for his readers an experience of physically being in Bali, he did so by stimulating their own bodily knowledge of the urban American landscape.

McPhee's story begins in 1931, when McPhee set out from New York in search of music he had heard on a recording:

I was a young composer, recently back in New York after student days in Paris, and the past two years had been filled with composing and the business of getting performances. It was quite by accident that I had heard the few gramophone records that were to change my life completely, bringing me out here in search of something quite indefinable—music or experience, I could not at this moment say. The records had been made in Bali, and the clear, metallic sounds of the music were like the stirring of a thousand bells, delicate, confused, with a sensuous charm, a mystery that was quite overpowering. (*HIB*, 2)

McPhee described how at the time of the initial voyage he had not planned to stay long. But his stay in Bali would linger on for nearly a decade. Some of the major events McPhee described include the building of a home in the Balinese style, adopting a son who would prove a talented dancer, and initiating a revival of *gamelan semar pegulingan*, a genre that had all but disappeared by the time McPhee arrived. Though he never made himself the focus of the stories, he was nonetheless one of his own objects of representation. This he accomplished mostly by contrast in his interactions with the Balinese characters, and, in one case, with a Westerner. When McPhee first came to Bali, A Dutch hotel manager chastised him for riding in the front seat of his car, next to his Balinese driver:

I don't like to see you there in the front seat. The white man must never forget to maintain the dignity of the white race.

He gave a gentle belch.

Then as an afterthought he added, If you really must sit in the front, drive the car yourself and let the chauffeur sit behind.

But I continued to sit the way I pleased. We drove with the top down, the hot sun beating on our heads. It was only when we passed the tennis court or entered the hotel driveway that I felt self-conscious, ostentatious and subversive. (*HIB*, 16-17)

As the only other Western character given a voice in the story, the hotel manager contributes to an impression of McPhee as quite alone. The manager speaks condescendingly about his Balinese servants and lasciviously about the young women peddling souvenirs. It would seem, based on this one case in contrast, that the other Westerners on the island held attitudes toward the Balinese that were elitist, objectifying, and hypocritical. McPhee would have little to do with them, nor they with him. He lived only among the Balinese and shunned other Westerners.

Bali, as McPhee described it, did not resemble the sexualized image of its earlier travel literature. McPhee's audience would have associated the island with bare-breasted, nubile women; such had been central to Bali's lore in the early days of tourism, the first travel brochure having been released by the Dutch government in 1914, only a few years after conquering the island in a series of takeovers of the royal courts so bloody and disturbing that it shocked the Dutch citizenry.⁴² McPhee wrote little about Bali's women. His characters were mostly Balinese musicians and dancers, men. This restraint inspired praise from some reviewers: "With great skill McPhee brings Bali to life and engages our interest without any allusion to sex in any form apart from that of the native mores. Hollywood might be aroused by McPhee's brilliant photographs of Balinese dancers and domestic help, but Hollywood would have to invent its own peculiar moral story."⁴³

The book's many positive reviews repeatedly praised McPhee both as a person and as a writer. They noticed the ease with which he moved among the Balinese and the simplicity and vivid sensuousness with which he committed his experience to prose. "[For McPhee], obviously, the process was as natural as taking a swim. It involved no loss of face, no surrender of personality, no degradation. These factors simply do not

⁴² On the Dutch colonial takeover of Bali and the ensuing early travel literature on Bali produced by the Dutch, see Adrian Vickers, "The Birth of Bali the Paradise," chap. 3 of *Bali: A Paradise Created* (Singapore: Periplus Editions, 1989). Vickers describes a shift in the popular conception of Bali in the Western imagination from an island of bare-breasted women to an island of art and music. This shift was in part effected by the work of artists and anthropologists on the island in the 1930s, among them Walter Spies, Miguel Covarrubias, Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, and McPhee himself. One of the most famous early travel books on Bali, with dozens of evocative (and provocative) photographs and drawings, was Miguel Covarrubias, *Island of Bali* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937).

⁴³ William McFee, "Pleasant Research Into Bali's Music," *The New York Sun*, 24 September 1946; clipping accessed in the Colin McPhee Collection of the UCLA Ethnomusicology Archives (hereafter cited as McPhee Coll.).

enter his story.”⁴⁴ Another reviewer commented, “Perhaps McPhee owes his success with the Balinese to his personality. The impression we get from his book is that we are reading the adventures of one who has been living in paradise and has returned to earth to tell us about it.”⁴⁵

Although few of the enthusiastic reviewers of *A House in Bali* were likely aware of just how much McPhee had left out of the narrative, to those who knew him personally during his Bali years, the book’s omissions must have seemed glaring. McPhee gave Jane Belo, his wife of the time, no mention whatsoever, though she had lived with him in the “house in Bali” and had in fact paid for its construction, its team of servants, and the expenses of the entire Balinese excursion. The development of conflict in their relationship and their eventual separation, in large part over McPhee’s hot temper and his relationship with a Balinese man, received no mention.⁴⁶ One presumes that the excision of her presence could not have been accomplished without major reconstruction of the story.

Yet of greater bearing for McPhee’s representation of Balinese culture was his almost total excision of the other Western artists and scholars on the island. These intellectuals, along with a booming tourist industry (which McPhee did briefly describe with some distaste), were actively influencing the arts that fascinated them, helping to give reality to

⁴⁴ Frederic G. Hyde, “Musician’s Sojourn in Bali: McPhee Tells of Five Years on Storied Isle,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer Book Review*; clipping accessed at McPhee Coll.

⁴⁵ McFee, “Pleasant Research.”

⁴⁶ The evidence for the latter source of strife between him and Belo comes in a letter to Sidney Cowell, in which McPhee wrote: “My few emotional-sentimental relations have not penetrated too deeply. My alliance with Jane was broken off by me in a final fit of stubbornness, and on the whole I don’t regret it, for she had turned into what for me was a prig, probably because she was tired of my untidy and carefree attitude towards life. Anyway, I was in love at the time with a Balinese, which she knew, and to have him continually around was too much for her vanity. So it all ended as I’d foreseen at the beginning, and Jane was unbelievably loyal long after there was any reason for it” (McPhee to Sidney Cowell, May 23 [after 1945], quoted in *CTW*, 142).

the famous claim that in Bali everyone was an artist. McPhee would have interacted with the members of this community continuously. All of their studies would have been both significantly affected—both aided and curtailed—by the Dutch colonial government. Such issues went unaddressed, as did the harsh economic conditions that colonialism was currently imposing on the Balinese.⁴⁷

One of the most influential Western consociates of McPhee was the German painter, writer, and musician Walter Spies, whose two-piano transcriptions of Balinese music were likely the inspiration for McPhee's own many efforts in the same genre.⁴⁸ Spies's near total absence from *A House in Bali* (he did receive passive mention) did not escape comment by one reviewer: Beryl De Zoete was herself a contemporary of McPhee in Bali, and the coauthor of Spies's *Dance and Drama in Bali* (1937). Though she otherwise wrote positively about McPhee's book, she criticized his omission of Spies:

Mr. McPhee was of course at liberty, as his story is personal, to make no allusion to other European or American residents in Bali. But as he does make casual mention of that very original painter and musician, Walter Spies, the most learned, beloved and trusted of all alien inhabitants of Bali, whose death by drowning during the war was far more than a personal calamity, one feels that recognition of the writer's many debts to him would have been a becoming gesture. Perhaps this awaits Mr. McPhee's book on Balinese music, which no one is so qualified to write as he.⁴⁹

There were more omissions. McPhee described the pleasures of transcribing Balinese music with I Made Lebah, his driver and assistant (Lebah was an extraordinary musician

⁴⁷ On Balinese tourism, the circle of intellectuals, the colonial administration, and the economic circumstances during the 1930s, see Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created*.

⁴⁸ For a discussion of Spies and *kebyar*'s emergence, see Tilman Seebass, "Change in Balinese Musical Life: Kebyar in the 1920s and 1930s," in *Being Modern in Bali: Image and Change*, ed. Adrian Vickers (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1996), 71-91.

⁴⁹ Beryl de Zoete, review of *A House in Bali*, by Colin McPhee, *The New Statesman and Nation*, 3 April 1948, p. 279.

who was becoming famous in his own right, eventually leading the internationally renowned gamelan community in Peliatan for many years): “Seriously, leisurely, we worked together till sundown” (*HIB*, 157). He did not mention that his employee found these sessions tedious and bewildering.⁵⁰ McPhee described himself as a gentle and detached participant in Balinese life, patient with some of the more difficult personalities; he did not mention that Lebah and surely others were disturbed by his sudden outbursts of anger when he drank. McPhee described how he had stimulated a revival of *gamelan semar pegulingan*; he did not credit Lebah for having done a good deal of the organizational work, while he provided the financial support for the project (which would not have been possible without Belo).

One reviewer marveled that McPhee had done more than render an accurate experience of being in Bali; he had transformed his reader into a Balinese:

So explicit is the translation (of sense, not words), that we glimpse Bali’s shadow-plays, hear Bali’s music, breathe Bali’s air, not as tourist spectators but as natives. This is no easy trick of portrayal, as any who have visited foreign lands—even the more analogous countries of Europe—and then have tried to interpret their inhabitants to the home folks can testify. . . . Therein, in [McPhee’s] gift for accepting a civilization on its own terms and then in those same terms representing that civilization to outsiders, lies his success.⁵¹

Minna Lederman similarly remarked on the physical immediacy of Bali as relayed by McPhee. She found that as she read the book she physically experienced Bali, and, what is most astonishing, she did so as though not with her own body but with a Balinese one.

⁵⁰ My thanks to David Harnish, who provided much valuable information on McPhee’s relationship with Lebah in a personal correspondence of 7 December 2007. Harnish discusses the relationship in “A Hermeneutical Arc in the Life of Balinese Musician, I Made Lebah,” *The World of Music: Journal of the Department of Ethnomusicology, Otto-Friedrich University of Bamberg* 43, no. 1 (2001): 21-41. On these topics also see *CTW*, 90-91 and 125-134.

⁵¹ Hope Stoddard, “Books of the Day,” *International Musician* (Nov. 1946). p. 21; accessed at McPhee Coll.

She not only breathed Bali's air, she breathed with Balinese lungs. She found that McPhee had successfully abandoned preconceptions and theories, and then had the intelligence and integrity to commit his experience unmediated into prose. The key was that he had stuck closely to the five senses, which were universal:

All is sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—an undeviating record of personal experience. But when we have read the last word we are in possession of the Balinese nature; we know how these islanders feel, play, worship, almost how they breathe.”⁵²

These two reviewers described feeling as if they had become Balinese, even though McPhee never professed to tell his story from a Balinese point of view, only from his own. McPhee himself wrote to Sidney Cowell that he was pleased with how the book had come out, and indicated that he was consciously aware of the importance that omission had played in the writing process, as well as the importance of directing the writing to a particular audience. Rather than stressing how he had created a transparent window upon Bali, he stressed how he had managed, by not including too much material, to create a sense of mystery (ironically what might be taken as the very definition of “exoticism”):

Really, I'm pleased with the book. It's a snobbish book, in a way, for what I've withheld, and where I've placed the accents. And yet it has a wide appeal, I know, from the variety of readers who have enjoyed the pieces. The only effect that counts in the long run is one of mystery, of what you imply rather than say. Perhaps I feel that way because I've been trained as a musician, and feel words the way I feel tones. The sentence must float, if you know what I mean. Not be weighted down. Just as the music of Mozart floats, while Beethoven, my god, and Bach too at times, sinks, sinks to the bottom of the glass. That's what comes of being too insistent about being sincere, or putting yourself into it.⁵³

⁵² Minna Lederman, “Music in the Bali Air,” *Saturday Review*, 23 November 1946, p. 19; accessed at McPhee Coll.

⁵³ McPhee to Sidney Cowell, “Friday” [1946]; quoted in *CTW*, 143.

A few of the metaphors in *A House in Bali* are particularly evocative. One example is the following, in which McPhee employed two images peculiar to a city like New York or Paris in order to evoke the change of light throughout a Balinese day:

In the early morning the island had a golden freshness, dripped and shone with moisture like a garden in a florist's window. By noon it had become hard and matter-of-fact. But in the late afternoon the island was transformed once more; it grew unreal, lavish and theatrical like old-fashioned opera scenery. As the sun neared the horizon men and women turned the colour of new copper, while shadows grew purple, the grass blue, and everything white reflected a deep rose. (*HIB*, 18)

Otherworldly colors—gold, copper, purple, blue, and rose—here collaborated with the similes of the florist's window and the opera set. Both of the latter, as encountered in an urban landscape, were themselves representations, pointing to things physically separated from the viewer. The florist's window offered excerpts from a garden that could only be imagined. The flowers were encased in glass like artifacts in a museum, and they beckoned the passerby into the shop. The opera, perhaps the luxurious, “old-fashioned” kind of nineteenth-century productions in particular, cast in artificial lighting the fantastic, the alluring, and the bizarre, but only as enactments. These two visual metaphors for the Balinese times of day suggested to the reader that an adequate rendering of the beauty of Balinese light could be conveyed only through the peculiar magic of Western display and theatrical spectacle itself.

In another episode, McPhee similarly described three young *legong* dancers with imagery from the world of Western representation and display, specifically via the media of sculpture and of film:

Their gestures had infinite elegance, and they seemed like little statues, intricate and delicate, that had come to life—not with suppleness, but, like the sequence of images in a film, in a series of poses that lasted the mere fraction of a second. You felt they were conscious of every sixteenth-note in the music. (*HIB*, 19)

The effectiveness of McPhee's account, which the readers had remarked upon as universal, was in fact contingent upon their occupation of a particular historical position. The presence of such metaphors for the young dancers as "statues" and "images in a film" suggests that, to the extent that McPhee's readers felt themselves to be mysteriously occupying Balinese bodies, that "trick of portrayal" was accomplished by awaking their own bodily memories, in particular their experiences of other evocative representations. The fact that Bali seemed so immediate to them was precisely because McPhee had drawn upon images from the world that they, as urbanites, already occupied.

The above discussion of McPhee's representational techniques is meant to provide illustrations of how the task of cultural representation necessitates the cutting away of materials, the bringing forth of only a few, and the construction of something coherent from those few on formal/ideological terms that are accessible to their new readers/observers/listeners/consumers, which may be quite foreign to the people represented. In transference for comprehension on new terms, cultural information must be processed into the form of knowledge previously consumed, acquiring the taste of that which is already understood and desired. The artistry of representing an experience in a foreign culture involves choosing which details to forget. It involves knowing the suppression of which sensations will evoke the desired, the excision of which details will establish an intelligible story, and the inclusion of which would bore, confuse, or disgust a person likely to sit down with one's book.

In McPhee's case this is not exclusively a theoretical issue. As shown, in *A House in Bali* McPhee's omissions were extravagant and occasionally brazen, as in his excision of Belo from the story. Fortunately for McPhee, he was skillful enough with the technique

that there was little suspicion of his artistic cuts. And yet, though I have emphasized how McPhee's representation of Bali was neither objective nor "true" in any naïve sense, neither do I argue that his representations were false or even that they were less truthful than those of other authors of such ethnographies (though McPhee might have been more canny than some other authors about his artistic manipulations). Based on my own experiences in Bali since 2002, no part of McPhee's description of Bali in the 1930s strikes me as improbable, and there is much that feels familiar. Rather than observe that McPhee created a false or inauthentic account, I seek to examine how even an earnest and informed ethnographer must play elaborate games in order to transform something foreign into something intelligible. It is McPhee's trick of conjuring a non-mediated representation of Bali that I seek to unveil.

A House in Bali was not the first of McPhee's artistic representations of Balinese music and culture, nor was it the first in which he employed the techniques of omission and metaphor. As will be seen, these techniques were present in both the article "The 'Absolute' Music of Bali" and the orchestral composition *Tabuh-tabuhan* of 1935-36. In both works McPhee employed metaphors to link the music of Bali and that of the modernist milieu of New York. These were not literal metaphors in terms of their syntax: there were no statements such as "the Balinese percussion orchestra *is* the percussion orchestra of our contemporary modernist composers." The latter half of the metaphor was, for the most part, unstated. To those from outside of McPhee's modernist circle, those statements about Bali might have seemed to be neutral, perhaps intriguing but not reflecting directly upon the Western world. But within McPhee's milieu, his words would have been powerfully charged. Before discussing the metaphors of "The 'Absolute'"

Music of Bali” and *Tabuh-tabuhan* I will present an overview of the position of composers of new music in the 1920s and ‘30s upon “the primitive” (in broad terms), which will prepare the discussion of metaphor in McPhee’s works.

American Modernist Views of “the Primitive” in the 1920s and ‘30s

While McPhee’s compositions were few, he was a successful ethnographer in so far as his ethnographic works, particularly the posthumous ethnography *Music in Bali*, continue to be remembered and referred to. As I have argued, McPhee’s accomplishment was of a sort that must necessarily be attributed to a successful ethnographer: that of having composed convincing partial truths. Already preceding *A House in Bali*, in the brief article “The Absolute Music of Bali” published in *Modern Music* and the orchestral composition *Tabuh-tabuhan* McPhee represented Bali in prediction of that which members of the community of composers of new music had the capacity to hear. The themes of representation in each work are in fact much the same. Though McPhee constructed a tailored representation of Bali to appeal to his composer colleagues, I do not consider that to be a dishonest act. He did not distort what he knew of Bali so as to increase its allure. Rather, I am considering his tailored truths as necessary to the act of speaking about non-Western music within his particular milieu.

At the time of McPhee’s return visit to the U.S. in 1935-36, when he created these two works, he was already the most deeply initiated of modernism’s voyagers into non-Western culture. McPhee seems at that time to have been eager to share his Balinese musical discoveries and to make a name for himself not only as a composer with a specialized knowledge of a non-Western musical tradition but as a composer who,

through extended study of such a tradition, had attained special certainty about what music (as a trans-cultural concept) most fundamentally was.

McPhee's efforts to introduce Balinese music to this audience must be read as taking advantage of a broader mode of thinking in the modernist milieu regarding the relation between modernist music and music of the "primitive." Primitivism, on the one hand and as it is most commonly understood, was an artistic movement that sought to emulate "primitives." Who these "primitives" were and what they were like was not at all given, since most modernist composers had little or no contact with the people that they believed to be primitives. Recordings of "primitive" music were less available than "primitive" art objects, and even the latter required interpretation if one was to understand their "primitive" essence. All this meant that the "primitives" that influenced modernist composers were, to a very great degree, their own constructions. This does not imply that they were simply fantasies, that the conception of "primitives" bore no relationship to any actual living people. Some modernists devoted tremendous amounts of time to their studies, and in McPhee's case, studied through first-hand contact with "primitive" peoples.

On one side of the coin modernists drew influence from "primitives;" on the other side modernists created these "primitives" in their own image. This was inevitable, as the terms at hand by which to conceive of "primitives" were necessarily the ones of the modernists' own intellectual milieu. The result was a continuous reshifting of modernist aesthetics based on new ideas about "primitives" and a continually revised conception of the nature of "primitives" in parallel with shifts in modernist aesthetics. In the minds of modernists, modernists and primitives were brothers.

An explicit articulation of this idea was made in 1934 by Raymond Petit, who argued that exotic music was “modern” music, and that in terms of its “modern”-ness—in the sense of forward-looking—it fared well in comparison with the supposedly “civilized arts” of the concert hall. Petit used the term “exotic” rather than “primitive,” but he shared with primitivism the idea of a generalized Other that had universal characteristics that Western concert music lacked:

At all events, exotic music . . . seems to me to be something of the present, as modern as many of our so-called civilized arts. A Khen solo intended to aid the search for the body of an infant, is as alive and of the present as any artificial and ephemeral sonata which flourishes in our concert halls. The congress of Mohammedan music held in Cairo in 1932 seems to me as modern as most of our music festivals.... In some quite different fashion, the musician of the future should be able to guide himself by principles like these, to re-establish contact with the universe.⁵⁴

McPhee’s statements of 1935-36 were located within this paradigm. Prior to his 1931 departure to Bali, McPhee had been a member of a tightly knit community of young composers, and he directed his 1935-36 statements to them. Returning to the U.S. that year McPhee had already written to Cowell of his plans: a book on Balinese music and the intention to have “a couple of orchestral work[s] finished by fall—a prelude and toccata [*sic*], and a ‘fantasia’ for piano and orchestra on Balinese melodies and rhythms—authentic stuff and not dished-up impressionism à la Eichheim.”⁵⁵ He proclaimed: “After those years of silence, and geographical remoteness, I announce my return to the land of the living.” Among those “living” friends and colleagues were the

⁵⁴ Raymond Petit, “Exotic and Contemporary Music,” *Modern Music* 10 (1934): 203.

⁵⁵ McPhee to Henry Cowell, written from “New York Central Lines—En Route,” spring 1935, quoted in *CTW*, 93. McPhee refers to Henry Eichheim, a composer and conductor who championed Debussy, Ravel, and Fauré. Eichheim composed two works for orchestra and Javanese gamelan instruments: *Java* (1929) and *Bali* (1933).

composers Carlos Chávez, and Edgard Varèse, and Cowell himself. McPhee's statements about Bali at this time were uttered in dialogue with those of these composers and others; his field experiences served as reiteration and elaboration of their ideas (which were mostly uninformed by fieldwork) rather than in contradiction of them.

Almost a decade earlier, when after a two-year stint of study in Paris (1924-26) McPhee had first arrived in New York, the modernist movement in America was still quite young. Its members made this a point of pride. McPhee was one of the movement's many promising but not-yet established figures. He had studied composition with the avant-garde leader Varèse, and in 1928 became a founding member of the Pan American Association of Composers along with Henry Cowell, Carlos Chávez, and Edgard Varèse.

Modernism in 1920s New York thrived on a desire to be artistically independent from Europe. Varèse had observed upon his 1915 arrival in the U.S. that no one seemed to know anything about modern music.⁵⁶ In 1921 he founded the International Composers' Guild with the intention of establishing a footing for modern music in New York. By 1923, as interest in an American composition had risen, another organization splintered off. The League of Composers, whose design was to focus on American compositions, began publishing the journal *Modern Music* in 1924 (it was originally titled the *League of Composers Review*). In 1927 the Guild dissolved, and in 1928 Varèse created The Pan American Association of Composers. The formation of this new organization suggested

⁵⁶ See R. Allen Lot, "New Music for New Ears': The International Composers' Guild," *Journal of the America Musicological Society* 36, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 266-286, on Varese's role in establishing modern music as an American movement through The International Composers' Guild. The assumption that Varèse entered an American musical scene that was completely absent of modernist interests has been challenged. In 1915, Leo Ornstein had already performed a concert of modernist piano works. On the subject of Ornstein's early modernist career and his withdrawal from concert life in the mid-1920s, just as American modernism was in its rise, see Michael Broyles and Denise Von Glahn, *Leo Ornstein: Modernist Dilemmas, Personal Choices* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 2007).

that the Americas (with New York as implied capital), in their explosion of modernist activity, now themselves constituted an independent musical culture, not merely a satellite of Europe. The mission statement of the Association indicated the newness of this situation:

Encouragement may be derived from the fact that whereas a few years ago it would have been impossible to find a sufficient number of American composers with new musical ideals to form such an association, today there is a sizable group of progressive men and women who, although representing many different tendencies, are banded together through serious and sincere interest in furthering all the finest music being written in the Americas.⁵⁷

Besides having his works performed on programs by the Guild, the Pan American Association, and other groups, McPhee participated in the community of composers by contributing to *Modern Music* (1924-1946), which was perhaps the most significant forum for discussions of “new music” at the time.⁵⁸ One can see modernism emerge in its pages as a movement as seriously believed in by its members on the one hand as it was indefinable and diffuse on the other. Buzz words such as absolute music, *Gebrauchsmusik*, mechanism, neoclassicism and (neo)primitivism peppered the journal’s submissions. In its mission statement, the editors invited a plurality of opinions united in the name of innovation:

In this magazine we shall present the opinions of informed men who accept the changing world of music to-day as inevitable. While the League of Composers is not pledged to the support of any new phase or dogma, it affirms a belief in the progressive development of art.... Our sole intention is to bring forward the ideas

⁵⁷ Mission statement of the Pan American Association of Composers, quoted in Deane L. Root, “The Pan American Association of Composers (1928-1934),” *Anuario Interamericano de Investigacion Musical* 8 (1972): 51.

⁵⁸ On the importance of *Modern Music* to the milieu of composers, see Minna Lederman, *The Life and Death of a Small Magazine* (“*Modern Music*,” 1924-1946) (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Institute for Studies in American Music, Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, 1983); Wilfrid Mellers, “Modern Music—Seen from America,” *The Musical Times* 125, no. 1694 (April 1984): 206-207; and Eric Salzman, “*Modern Music* in Retrospect,” *Perspectives of New Music* 2, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1964): 14-20.

of men who have chosen to lift their eyes from the certainties of the past to read the portents of their time.⁵⁹

This statement reflects the fact that, though in its diversity this American modernist movement permitted definition only as a constellation of ideas and compositional techniques, the imperative to innovate and to be reflective of present times was clearly its pervasive element. The statement's metaphor for innovation as a "lifting of the eyes" reflects the movement's habit of defining its various endeavors in terms of what it awakened from: what they saw as a befuddled European tradition. At their heels was the behemoth of romanticism, ahead were the various paths to a more vital future, paths perhaps only unified by their point of departure. One of the methods of distinguishing themselves from the European tradition was the adoption of various sorts of indigenous musical materials, especially but not exclusively those of the Americas. An easy familiarity with such materials, it was sometimes stated, was what distinguished American composers from overly sophisticated Europeans. For this reason, primitivism became one of the main tendencies of American music. Dane Rudhyar, for instance, stated that for the Western world

The gateway to the Orient is through Occidental America. It is therefore natural to assume that it will be through America that the influence of Oriental music will first be felt in the Occident.⁶⁰

A paradigm of past/future dichotomies arose. More precisely, the contemporary rhetoric tended to divide the history of music into three units. The long past (which might be identified in various historical periods and in living "primitive" cultures) and the

⁵⁹ Introductory statement, *League of Composers Review* (*Modern Music* became the title beginning with volume 3) 1, no. 1 (February 1924).

⁶⁰ Dane Rudhyar, "Oriental Influence in American Music," in *American Composers on American Music*, ed. Henry Cowell (Stanford Univ. Press, 1933), 185.

future (reflected in the works of a few modernist composers) were equated, with the immediate past of the nineteenth century, which also represented the current mainstream of the Europe-oriented concert-music culture of America, sandwiched in between. What the avant-garde heralded in music's future they also tended to see mirrored in music's long past. Since living "primitive" cultures were commonly viewed as bearing the same traits as Europe's long past, they were often made the object of study and discussion. These studies and their resulting innovations lent an increasing "reality" to the equation of "primitive" and modernist practices. Modernists found that their own tendencies were inspired by "primitives," and they proved those tendencies as authentic by reference to "primitives." Among the movements that grew from interpretations of past practices were Neoclassicism and *Gebrauchsmusik*. Indeed, most contemporary ideological movements made some association with the long past, even if, as in the case of the absolute music movement, their ideological origins were actually in the nineteenth century.

Frequently woven into discussions of "primitive" musics published in *Modern Music* and similar spaces—earnest, perceptive, and informed as they often were—were attributions to those long-past musics of that which was currently of interest in the musical centers of the West (e.g. rhythmic complexity). Behind this interest in an authentic source of music was not only a desire for compositional guidance but also a desire to find antecedents to composers' already established practices. As I stated in the Introduction, I find it best to understand these modernist engagements with cultural difference, whether in study of the past or in study of non-Western culture, neither as true "recoveries" of the facts of other cultures for the modern world on the one hand, nor as pure fantasies of the modernists' creation on the other. The process of creating a

primitivist modernism was necessarily reciprocal: composers were indeed influenced by different musics, but this necessitated the construction of an image from which to be influenced. The modernists constructed their “primitives” in their own continuously shifting image and in distinction from the image they simultaneously constructed of mainstream European concert music. Not one of the elements can be understood in isolation from or as prior to the others.

McPhee’s colleague and supporter Carlos Chávez was one such modernist with one eye on “the primitive” and the other on a peculiarly American modernism. For Chavez, who in 1936 conducted the premiere of McPhee’s *Tabuh-tabuhan* in Mexico City, these complementary interests were both pursued on Mexican soil. Chávez was something of an archeologist of Aztec and other indigenous materials. Herbert Weinstock called him “one of the men now giving a musical meaning to the geographical term America,” suggesting that his stylistic roots sunk deep into the soil of rural Mexico, even as his style was emblematic of urban modernity.⁶¹ In the same year that he conducted McPhee’s *Tabuh-tabuhan* he conducted his own *Sinfonía India* (1935-36) on Mexican indigenous themes. Also that year Chávez described in *Modern Music* a program in “free composition” that he had established at the Conservatory of Mexico. The program was an integrative approach for students to develop individual “technic” through careful study of Mexico’s Indian musical traditions.⁶²

Though few composers in McPhee’s circle adopted the specific designation of “primitivist” (as will be seen in the next chapter, Cowell did announce a “neo-primitivist”

⁶¹ Herbert Weinstock, “Carlos Chavez,” *The Musical Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (October 1936): 438.

⁶² Carlos Chávez, “Revolt in Mexico,” *Modern Music* 8, no. 3 (March-April 1936): 35-40.

movement), many displayed the primitivist tendency to think that musics outside of the West, whatever their particular features, would necessarily represent humanity at a more fundamental or authentic state. It was because of this view, that “primitives” represented modern peoples’ more elemental selves, that composers of the modernist milieu took as a point of pride the proximity of their own music to that of primitives, and sought to paint the romanticist style as distant from that of primitives. Henry Cowell wrote in a 1933 submission to *Modern Music* that, though there had been no formal embrace of a “neoprimitivist” movement, the tendency “to draw on those materials common to the music of all the people of the world” was growing stronger in modern music, and that the newest music being composed was far more genuinely related to this primitive source than that of any preceding musical period. As far as modern music was rhythmically complex, it resembled music of the primitive, “because rhythm is more complex in aboriginal than in classic music.”⁶³ Even if such a resemblance was accidental and not the result of any true influence by “primitive” music, to Cowell it nevertheless represented a real correlation. I will discuss Cowell’s views on “the primitive” at greater length in the next Chapter.

With equal intensity of inspiration and of scorn for those who lacked it, McPhee’s associate Lazare Saminsky wrote of how Eastern musics were revitalizing the faded Western tradition:

Marvelous are those flare-ups of a renaissance appearing from an Eastern racial direction just in this era of marasmus and death, in an age of visible petrification in Western European music! Possibly, the new Russian, Hungarian, Hebrew, Spanish and other vibrant and living streams of the Eastern flood now pouring its cutting waters into the new music of the West, have as their mission the stamping out of creative Ptolemaism ingrained in the Western musical mass-mind. This

⁶³ Henry Cowell, “Towards Neoprimitivism,” *Modern Music* 10, no. 3 (March-April 1933): 151, 149-53.

new and triumphant cortège of the musical East, augurates a real return to our common racial spring, heralds a reunion of the musical creed, a tonal merging of the Orient and the Occident.⁶⁴

Occasionally McPhee's own crassly primitivist side emerged, not when he wrote with his characteristic subtlety about Balinese music but when discussing other musical traditions. Though never floating to such fanciful heights as Saminsky, McPhee would occasionally fall back on the principle, applied *a priori* as a determinant of authenticity, that robust and hard-edged music was "primitive." By the simple virtue of having those qualities, a composition could be championed as representative of music at its most essential. By having other undesirable qualities a composition could be labeled as "exoticist." He praised Chávez's *Sinfonía India* on those terms:

One feels on hearing this music first of all a primitive energy that has nothing of the exotic but is a clear and forceful expression of racial vitality both youthful and healthy. Here one will find none of the Europeanisms or French impressionism still lingering in the works of so many Latin-American composers.... The orchestration is done in primary colors; the sonorities are hard and penetrating, superimposed upon a resilient percussive base composed as far back as 1926.... A physical tension prevails from the first note to the last.⁶⁵

Other than by these methods, it is hard to guess how McPhee, who at the time of this review would have had little or no direct contact with native Mexicans, assessed the authentic representation of their "racial vitality."⁶⁶ From a crassly primitivist point of view, direct contact and study didn't matter. The terms of authenticity for the representation of pre-colonial Mexican music were largely based on ideas of "the

⁶⁴ Lazare Saminsky, *Music of Our Day: Essentials and Prophecies* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1932), 81-83, quoted in CTW, 62-63.

⁶⁵ McPhee, "New York—January, February 1936," *Modern Music* 13, no. 3 (March-April 1936): 42.

⁶⁶ In early 1936 when writing this review, McPhee had not yet been to Mexico. He and Belo would travel there in June of that year and stay through the premier of *Tabuh-tabuhan* in early September. See CTW, 100-102 and 117-119.

primitive” that were pre-established and could be assumed to apply to early Mexicans by virtue of their being “primitives.” An authentic portrayal was then not so much a matter of demonstrating careful study but of using approved techniques and tropes. “Primary colors,” shifting meters and polyrhythms, and extensive use of percussion were proper means to express “the primitive.” Impressionistic clouds and romantic storms were not, nor were the alluring melodic turns and chromatic harmonies that had characterized many nineteenth-century representations of non-Western musics. A few years later McPhee called the *Sinfonía India* “a perfect example of the right way to utilize exotic material,”⁶⁷ again giving weight to the *style* of the utilization among criteria for assessing authentic representation. For modernists, a peculiar interdependence developed in this way between stylistic concerns developed in an urban milieu—in argument with other, more dominant urban musics—and primitivist claims to authenticity.

When speaking of Bali, McPhee was both like and unlike those of his colleagues who were more casually acquainted with foreign musics. Others did little more than detect certain predictable features in foreign musics, replacing romanticist clichés with differently uninformed modernist ones. Some, when describing non-Western musics, did little more than give a self-description of modernism as they saw it—speaking about non-Western musics was also a method of self definition, and, by negative comparison, a method of defining the conservative musical mainstream. It would be absurdly reductive to understand McPhee’s investigation into Balinese music, lasting nearly a decade, as having taken him no further than the readymade impressions he started off with. Nevertheless, the 1935-36 communication of his discoveries in Bali to members of his

⁶⁷ McPhee, “Scores and Records,” *Modern Music* 17 (November 1939): 52.

American world necessitated that he engage with the currently established conventions of primitivism.

A 1935-36 Return Visit: Textual Issues of Ethnography in “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali” and *Tabuh-tabuhan*

Printed in *Modern Music*, McPhee’s first article on Balinese music “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali” was directed specifically to American composers. Its style was descriptive and direct, and at seven pages it was short (though of fair length relative to most of that journal’s articles). Aside from its provocative title, it did not employ other current buzz words (some of which I will discuss below) of modernism or engage in heavy-handed polemics, as did many contemporary articles in *Modern Music*. Nevertheless, when read among other articles in that journal, McPhee’s flat, neutral descriptions do begin to buzz argumentatively in the style of those others. Only in a few parts of the article did McPhee explicitly contrast Balinese music and “our” music, “ours” being not literally his own compositions, but the music he identified as emblematic of Western culture (i.e. 19th-century concert music):

In conception Balinese music is static, whereas ours is dynamic and generally the expression of a crisis, a conflict. In execution Balinese music is extremely dynamic, while paradoxically much of our own music, especially that of the nineteenth century, seems by comparison, turgid and lethargic. The very phrasing of our music is declamatory; our orchestras are heavy and lack buoyancy. A breath of fresh air needs to be let into the concert halls. (*AMB*, 164)

McPhee’s authorial persona was of a former naïf, who had only come to his expressed realizations about the true nature of music after living in Bali. Through extended exposure to Balinese music (which McPhee stated was essentially the same as

that of other Oriental musics), he had arrived at an entirely new and “purified” understanding of how musical truth was grounded in human nature:

What can be the reactions of an Occidental, after prolonged contact with such a music, so essentially different from his own? What influences will penetrate his growing acquaintance with it? For four years the writer has lived in Bali, in an isolation broken only by brief trips to Java, Siam, China and Japan, where the approach to music is fundamentally like that of Bali, abstract and anonymous. During such a period of time one’s conceptions inevitably experience some change, become, it is hoped, broadened and purified. (*AMB*, 163)

McPhee explained that the nature of Balinese musical expression was entirely inexpressive, its forms in no way intended to give voice to individuals’ emotions. He also discussed the function of music in Balinese society, its percussive instrumentation, the manner in which the Balinese might arrange old musical materials into a new composition, and how they organized pitch and rhythm. As will be seen, these were not in fact unprecedented observations; these “discoveries” in the field were all echoes of McPhee’s compositional concerns prior to his 1931 voyage to Bali.

The same was true of *Tabuh-tabuhan*. It would have seemed that in its incorporation of authentic Balinese musical materials, *Tabuh-tabuhan* was bringing something truly foreign and perhaps revelatory into the concert hall. Yet, as I will discuss, the medium of this work determined its content: it was music for the concert hall, and it was ultimately only capable of speaking in the concert hall’s vocabulary, however novelly. In the very same utterances with which *Tabuh-tabuhan* “spoke” about Balinese music, purportedly as “a breath of fresh air” in the concert hall, it recycled modern music’s sounds and expressed its familiar themes.

Table 1 presents some metaphors that I argue McPhee implied in “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali” and realized musically in *Tabuh-tabuhan*. The left column lists quotations

from “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali” that describe aspects of Balinese music. The right column lists modernist ideas to which these quotations correspond. In the case of “absolute music” McPhee used the buzz word itself. On other points he did not, and made no explicit reference to modernist music. Taken literally, he was simply describing Balinese music in a neutral fashion. In the following sections I will explain what McPhee meant by “absolute music” and several of these non-explicit connections, point-by-point. For the most part I will not be discussing the accuracy of McPhee’s statements about Bali in “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali.” My purpose rather will be to illuminate how the article’s statements about Bali were in fact reflections upon modernism, as they would have to be.

| Description in “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali” | Modernist Concept apparent in <i>Tabuh-tabuhan</i> |
|---|---|
| “absolute,” “impersonal and non-expressive” | absolute music |
| “primarily utilitarian” “At a ceremony its presence is as necessary as incense, flowers, and offerings” | <i>Gebrauchsmusik</i> |
| “The apotheosis of percussion” | percussion orchestras |
| “The present tendency...to break up the old compositions and weld fragments or episodes from these into new works” | textural juxtaposition |
| “no voice in <i>gamelan</i> is without its rhythmic function” | polyrhythm, polymeter |
| “aerial sonority” “each of the five notes of the scale may be a point of gravity, thus forming five tonal centres through which the melody may pass at will” | pandiatonicism, panpentatonicism |
| “often four or more types of <i>gamelans</i> will be assembled..., a barbaric splendor of clashing tonalities” | Polytonality, bitonality |

Table 1. McPhee’s Metaphors Between Balinese Gamelan and Modernist Composition (Quotes on left are taken from McPhee, “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali”)

I am not sure that McPhee intentionally invoked all these metaphors. In “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali” he made his assessment of Balinese music as “absolute music” explicit. As for the other double-meanings that I discuss, it may be that some were intentional, some were unconscious, and some, within that milieu, were simply beyond his prevention.

That Balinese music was “absolute” music was McPhee’s boldest assertion. What did he mean in applying to Balinese music the concept of absolute music, particular as it was applied to the concerns of his own artistic milieu? Though the term is clothed in quotation marks in McPhee’s title, it appears without them in the body of the text, and there is no indication that he intended it with irony:

[In Bali] is a music which has successfully achieved the absolute,—impersonal and non-expressive, with a beauty that depends upon form and pattern and a vigor that springs from a rhythmic vitality both primitive and joyous.... The original nature of music reveals itself with ever greater clarity as a phenomenon of sound rather than of language, as something springing from the urge to rhythmic expression, spontaneous and physical, rather than as a means for unembarrassed self-revelation. (*AMB*, 163)

What McPhee implied by absolute music was a more complex idea than simply music without a program. His was a more radical concept of music of pure form and without emotion, defined in differentiation from German orchestral music, which expressed programs, ideas, emotions, and the unique personality of an individual. German orchestral music was fettered to language, and as such doomed to contingency. The absolute music McPhee claimed to have discovered in Bali had a rhythmic vitality by which it bypassed semantic and subjective levels and connected directly to the human body. In the West, such a pure form of music could only be proposed, experimented at, or

argued for, but in Bali McPhee claimed to have found it, “achieved,” in the living culture of a people.

Such ideas about “the original nature of music” were already in circulation among modernists before McPhee arrived in Bali in 1931. In fact, McPhee’s statement came around the same time as, and indeed may have been directly or indirectly influenced by, similar remarks by Antonin Artaud, whose relationship to Balinese arts was far more casual. Artaud had witnessed a Balinese dance drama at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris, and based on that performance he had declared that “The Balinese have realized, with the utmost rigor, the idea of pure theater, where everything, conception and realization alike, has value, has existence only in proportion to its degree of objectification *on the stage*. They victoriously demonstrate the absolute preponderance of the director (*metteur en scène*) whose creative power *eliminates words*” (Artaud’s italics).⁶⁸ This would be the independence of theater from language, a theater with its own language which would emerge directly from the body of the actor.

Other composers spoke similarly about the non-expressive “nature of music.” As already noted in the Introduction, Stravinsky stated, “I consider music, by its nature, incapable of expressing anything, whether a feeling, an attitude, a psychological state, a natural phenomenon, etc. Expressiveness has never been an immanent feature of music.”⁶⁹ Absolute music was, then, music reduced to its “immanent” features, and it was

⁶⁸ Antonin Artaud, “On the Balinese Theater,” chap. 4 in *The Theater and It’s Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 53-54. As Artaud’s writings on Balinese theater predict McPhee’s themes, Artaud’s in turn were predicted by other reviewers of the same performance. See Nicola Savarese, “1931: Antonin Artaud Sees Balinese Theatre at the Paris Colonial Exposition,” trans. Richard Fowler, *TDR* 45, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 51-77.

⁶⁹ Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), 53.

as such the music of that most elemental segment of humanity “the primitives,” who it could be expected would exhibit it un-self-consciously.

Ironically, though among musicologists today the term absolute music is most often associated with Edward Hanslick, romantic philosophy, and 19th-century instrumental music, for those in McPhee’s circle the chief foil of the absolute had become precisely that same German orchestral tradition. McPhee’s crowd tended to articulate their ideas of what absolute music was through statements of what it was not: the gloomy, self-absorbed moans and enervated sobs that they saw as characteristic of German music.⁷⁰ In a 1925 publication in *Modern Music* Adolph Weissman took note of both this combative character of the movement and its primitivist associations. His explanation of the term had a note of parody, as he in fact felt that the ideal was too uncompromising:

One of the chief tenets in the doctrine of the new music is evolution toward the absolute,—in other words toward pure music, or better still, pure counterpoint.... The tendency, it is obvious, has been developed in opposition to the music of the nineteenth century. It is in conflict with the romantic, the emotional and the naturalistic. It demands of music the abolition of everything realistic, everything human, so that the art may emerge in its native purity.⁷¹

Among composers of new music, there was no consensus as to the meaning of absolute music. Musical purity was its critical theme, but purity from what? Most inclusively, absolute music sought purity not from “everything human,” as Weissman

⁷⁰ In defining “absolute music” for the *New Grove Dictionary*, Roger Scruton observes that meaning of the term has historically—not just in the time of McPhee—tended to become clear only when stated in the negative: “The term ‘absolute music’ denotes not so much an agreed idea as an aesthetic problem.... It names an ideal of musical purity, an ideal from which music has been held to depart in a variety of ways; for example, by being subordinated to words (as in song), to drama (as in opera), to some representational meaning (as in program music), or even to the vague requirements of emotional expression. Indeed, it has been more usual to give a negative than a positive definition of the absolute in music. The best way to speak of a thing that claims to be ‘absolute’ is to say what it is not.” Roger Scruton: “Absolute Music,” *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 3 December 2004), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

⁷¹ Adolph Weissman, “The Tyranny of the Absolute,” *Modern Music* 2, no. 2 (1925): 17.

suggested, but from everything that limited it to being human in any particular time and place. The modernists' objective was precisely to create a music that was more purely human—a human stripped of its ideas and emotions, down to its body, unadorned and pulsing with energy. This ideal contained within it the promise of a “true” music, independent of culture, and further the possibility that such a music actually existed in the world, somewhere far outside of the concert halls of the West.

Though my purpose in this chapter is not to challenge the accuracy of McPhee's statements about Bali, I feel that it is worth discussing how his claim that Balinese music would “never contain an emotion” may be impugned simply on its face, as it implies that he had access to the emotional lives of all Balinese. It is contradicted in Tilman Seebass's discussion of the expressive differences that were emerging in the 1920s and '30s between classical genres such as *gong gede* or *semar pegulingan* and the newer genre of *gong kebyar*:

The function of the [traditional *gamelan* repertoires] is to fill the air with sound and to establish an emotional state. This is also true of the traditional musical accompaniments in drama, where music underlines and illustrates specific emotional states and does not function in a narrative fashion. Action, however, is the key word for *kebyar*. Several scholars describe it as a potpourri of styles and techniques, in which the various pieces, used in an extended theatrical performance for the illustrations of topical scenes (love, grief, joy, battle), are compressed into a single composition.⁷²

Kebyar was the style emerging as dominant during McPhee's years in Bali, and it seems to have been the first to catch his attention. At the time of writing “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali” McPhee was certainly aware of the distinctions among styles, although he

⁷² Tilman Seebass, “Change,” 82. On the emotional and semantic dimensions of *kebyar*, see Michael Tenzer, *Gamelan Gong Kebyar: The Art of Twentieth-Century Balinese Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

wrote later that he did not begin to analyze the older forms until his later period in Bali.⁷³ Either the older or the newer Balinese music might have been interpreted as more “absolute.” *Kebyar* tended to incorporate materials from various sources, setting them in rapid juxtaposition, the result of which might be thought of as “absolute” or “formalistic” in the sense that no single emotional tone was allowed to dominate for long. Meanwhile, the classical genres with their consistent moods and precise structures might equally have been regarded as formalistic. Neither sort could really have been defined as emotionless (if emotion is understood to be immanent to the music itself), or to have existed in an emotional vacuum. Today an ethnomusicologist might discuss emotion (or non-emotion) in Balinese music by offering accounts of individual Balinese people’s descriptions of their musical experiences. In “The Absolute Music of Bali” McPhee “omitted” such accounts; only by this omission was he able to make claims about the music’s immanent features (and non-features).⁷⁴

After his return to Bali in 1936, McPhee gained a deeper understanding of the genre distinctions, and in fact developed a disdain for *kebyar* which had so dazzled him before. (It was at that point that he began work to stimulate a revival of the older style of *gamelan semar pegulingan*.) Upon his second return from Bali, McPhee wrote another article for *Modern Music*, in which he criticized *kebyar* as a corruption of true Balinese aesthetics. Ironically, he once again framed the issue as a dichotomy of formalism versus

⁷³ Letter to Aaron Copland, 16 February [1938], quoted in Oja, *CTW*, 123.

⁷⁴ In 1935-36 McPhee seems to have based his ideas about Balinese aesthetics primarily on *kebyar* (he would not do so in later publications). Whereas McPhee’s statements of the time framed this *kebyar*-based aesthetic as essentially different from, or foreign to, the music in his own modern world, Seebass interprets the rise of *kebyar* as reflective, in multiple ways, of the island’s brush with modernity with the entrance of the Dutch early in the century. The fragmentation of materials from older genres into *kebyar* compositions was reflective of the recent dissolution of the Balinese courts and with them the ceremonial functions of court musics.

expressivity. While the same concepts were operative, McPhee this time swiveled in his argument, claiming that the more emotionally characteristic genres were the truly “formalistic” ones, while *kebyar*, formerly an exemplar of the “absolute” music of Bali, now became “feverish and melodramatic” and an “aimless form of expression”:

The beauty, the strength, the artistic significance of Balinese music lay in its formalism, in the tradition which kept it the anonymous but individual expression of a race. Its development was slow and logical, the changes which gradually gave it a distinct Balinese quality were imperceptible. But in the past twenty years a new form, known as the *Kebyar* style, feverish and melodramatic, has suddenly arisen out of the old. While spectacular in its brilliance and occasional extraordinary virtuosity, this new music carries within it all the germs of decay. Tradition has been thrown overboard, and law and order discarded for innovations which, though at times beautiful in themselves, can in the end lead only to empty, aimless forms of expression.⁷⁵

In 1949 McPhee again described an absence of emotion in Balinese music (though at this point he only mentioned the topic in passing). This time his anger at *kebyar* seems to have softened (though by many accounts he continued to dislike the genre until the end of his life), and he apologized for the genre and reinstated it as an exemplar of the physicality of Balinese music:

[Balinese] music furnishes appropriate background for dance and drama, fills the air with festive sound. It is a formal, abstract art, created for the occasion, and the composers are unknown. It is true that in the newer music there is a dramatic surging of crescendos and diminuendos, a constant changing of mood. But the contrasts are like sunlight and shadow; they are the expression of the purely physical exuberance of the group rather than the expression of any emotional tension.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ McPhee, “The Decline of the East,” *Modern Music* 16 (1939): 160-167. In *Music in Bali*, published nearly thirty years later, McPhee expressed a more tempered, but still critical view of *kebyar*: “Some [*kebyar* compositions] are skillfully put together, showing the composer’s concern for contrast and condensation. Others are greatly overextended, their once striking effects transformed into clichés through constant recurrence. Many are marred by the excessive use of virtuoso cadenza-like passages which link together the main episodes and which aim primarily at display of skill. Lacking the classic calm, the broad melodic line, and the unity of mood of the older music, these tempestuous rhapsodies have great popular appeal because of their novelty and excitement” (p. 342).

⁷⁶ McPhee, “The Five-Tone Gamelan Music of Bali,” *Musical Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (April 1949): 252.

These reversals might be taken as an indication that the absolute music concept was so foreign to Balinese aesthetics that its application in one way or another was practically arbitrary. That *kebyar* was continuously reinterpreted so as to exemplify one side or the other of the “absolute” versus “emotional” dichotomy, that McPhee would continue to grasp at these concepts despite his shifting understanding of Balinese music, is an indication of how important these concepts were to him. The more significant point here is that in writing about Balinese music for his particular audience, these were the terms by which he felt compelled to speak. It was as if they were the part of the playing rules by which one was permitted to speak about non-Western music at all.

Walter Spies, another artist living in Bali at the same time as McPhee, did not belong to the same discursive community and did not play by the same rules. Seebass has observed that Spies, a German, found that *kebyar* confirmed his expressionistic tendencies, that it was resonant of “subjectivism” and “extravagance.” Such ideas would of course have been, at least on the surface, totally antithetical to McPhee’s (though both called *kebyar* “melodramatic,” one in praise and the other in condemnation). According to Seebass:

There is an inner affinity and sensibility for this music in Spies as Expressionist, hence the esthetic identity of the descriptive mode of his language and the object described; his “*expressionistische Tonkunst*” (Seebass’s term). Subjectivism, extravagance, dynamism, and, in particular, a new definition of the creative experience as the *totale Erlebnis* (total experience) are the characteristics of the literature and visual arts of the Expressionist movement. It is very striking to see a literary scholar describing the total artistic experience of the Expressionist as a “*kaleidoskopisches Zusammenrücken von Wirklichkeitsfragmenten*” (kaleidoscopic falling together of fragments of reality). One could not find a better description for the composition or centonization of *kebyar* piece.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Tilman Seebass, “Change,” 85. In mentioning “kaleidoscopic falling together of fragments of reality” Seebass is referring to Walter Muschg, *Von Trakl zu Becht* (Munich: Piper, 1961), 22.

While McPhee's concept of absolute music was formed in contradistinction from German music, he also described Balinese music using language reminiscent of another movement of German origins. This was the movement of *Gebrauchsmusik*, which had taken hold in the U.S. by the time of McPhee's 1935 return trip. McPhee described the functionality of Bali's music:

The primarily utilitarian nature of this music...emphasizes a conception rather different from ours,—that music may be something which is *not to be listened to in itself*. It may be marched to, danced to, or used to precipitate a state of trance by its hypnotic power; but never will it become personal, or contain an emotion. At a ceremony its presence is as necessary as incense, flowers and offerings. (McPhee's italics) (*AMB*, 165)

McPhee repeated again and again that Balinese music was joyously useful, stressing that music and dance “play a most important part in the life of the people,” and that, most of all, “what inspires the musician with wonder and envy, is the satisfactory *raison d'être* of music in the community” (*AMB*, 163). It seems the idea that Balinese music was *Gebrauchsmusik* was the one that McPhee most wanted to impress upon his readers. He also stressed that there were no composers in Bali, that music was very much an activity belonging to the general populous, and that the role of composers is taken up by *gurus* (teachers), who ensured music's continuation and development in the community without becoming a wholly original creative ego. Balinese music never resembled the inactive music of the concert hall, autonomous from life as truly lived.

Ideas of musical autonomy appear in both the *Gebrauchsmusik* discourse and the absolute music discourse. This is potentially confusing, for whereas in discussions of absolute music the stated objective was to create music “autonomous” of the contingencies of language and history, proponents of *Gebrauchsmusik* insisted upon

turning away from or finding an alternative to music as “autonomous,” in the sense of being isolated from everyday life and experienced passively. It was not inconsistent to be in favor of autonomy at one moment and against it at the next, as by both one could imply opposition to the excesses of music in the nineteenth century. The latter sense of the term implied that new music, whether or not it had ideological or emotional content, was to be enjoyed actively, and was to be woven into life’s fabric.

At its genesis the term *Gebrauchsmusik* was tied to primitivist notions. Paul Nettl, a scholar of dance music of the 17th century, was one of the first to employ the term in antithesis to the autonomous music that he saw as characteristic of his time. He observed that 17th-century dance music had diverged into two strains: on the one hand was music intended for actual dancing and on the other was an “increasing stylization” found in the suite of mixed dance forms. Nettl described a “certain removal from popular primordality (*Volkstümliche Ursprünglichkeit*)” characteristic of the stylized suite. His contemporary Leo Kestenberg communicated this ethic of “primordial” utility as a concern for contemporary composers, writing in 1921 that *Gebrauchsmusik* ‘is artistically as important as, and nowadays materially more promising than, concert music.’⁷⁸ For *Modern Music* in 1930, Hans Gutman characterized *Gebrauchsmusik* as a sociological concern of “Young Germany,” again framing the issue as an aesthetic argument with the nineteenth century:

During the nineteenth century music passed definitely into the class of luxuries reserved for the entertainment of the upper classes, and ceased to be an integral part in the life of the people. For the new audience which was ushered into

⁷⁸ Quoted in Stephen Hinton: “*Gebrauchsmusik*,” *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 3 December 2004), <http://www.grovemusic.com>). See also Nicolas Slonimsky, “*Gebrauchsmusik and Gemeinschaftsmusik*,” in *Music Since 1900* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1938), 572-573.

existence and power by the Revolution, the outmoded sociological approach to music, handed down by the previous generation, has proved unserviceable. Hence the birth of the new “*Gebrauchsmusik*,” the music for everybody, for everyday use, which is to replace the “*Luxusmusik*.” Obviously these new goals can be reached soonest in the fields now just opening up to music. Opera as well must yield to radical change. And—by no means least important in this program of reform—the auditor is to be roused from his lethargy, stimulated and induced to make music himself, instead of uncomprehendingly following the conductor’s baton.⁷⁹

As with absolute music, *Gebrauchsmusik* simultaneously cast itself as a revolution rolling across a Europe and America newly awake to their true modern situation, and drew its power from the claim that it was apparent in most or all places and at most or all time periods, except the time and place of Western concert music. *Gebrauchsmusik* contended to be one of modernism’s most profound discoveries of the obvious.

According to McPhee, one reason Balinese music was ideal as both an abstract music (without meaning or emotion) and a music suited to stimulate people from a state of lethargy into action, was its instrumentation—it was percussion music:

The apotheosis of percussion, these orchestras consist of many forms of gongs, large and small, cymbals, drums and a great variety of metal-keyed instruments,—an ideal medium for the abstract but at the same time dynamic nature of the music. (*AMB*, 164)

This passing statement about Balinese music’s instrumentation might have provoked the imagination of McPhee’s readers, as in the ten years prior to the composition of *Tabuh-tabuhan* there had been an explosion of interest in percussion among composers of new music. In Cowell’s 1933 article on “neo-primitivism,” he noted this new interest and identified it with the growing closeness of modernist musicians to “the primitive”:

Among the more radical works written by non-proletarian American composers recently, there may not be anything so very definitely primitive in style, but there are strong tendencies to use primitive means in creating new sorts of structures.

⁷⁹ Hans Gutman, “Young Germany, 1930,” *Modern Music* 7, no. 2 (1930): 7-8.

Up to this year, in my experience as a music publisher I have never been offered any work for percussion instruments alone. This season I have been offered fifteen different works for such combinations, the two most interesting being Varese's *Ionisation*, and William Russell's *Fugue for Eight Percussion Instruments*.⁸⁰

In 1930 Amadeo Roldán wrote his *Ritmicas* V and VI for percussion ensemble, and in 1933 New York saw the premiere of Varèse's *Ionisation* for 13 percussion instruments. The next year Cowell wrote his own *Ostinato Pianissimo* for eight percussion instruments, and in Australia Percy Grainger gave a series of lectures collectively titled *A Commonsense View of All Music*, the eleventh of which, "Tuneful Percussion," made mention of "Bali bell-orchestras" and "Javanese gong-orchestras." Following the lecture, Grainger presented his adaptation of Debussy's "Pagodes," which he believed to have been inspired by Javanese gamelan—Grainger arranged it for a percussion ensemble of harmonium, celeste, dulcitone, three pianos (twelve hands), xylophone, 'metal marimba,' and wooden marimba.⁸¹ Chávez, in a 1936 *Modern Music* article "Revolt in Mexico," described how his students used indigenous percussion instruments of Mexico to develop an original compositional technique and wean themselves of "academic" imports from Europe⁸²; his *Sinfonía India* of the same year employed, in addition to strings and winds, a percussion menagerie including a clay rattle, a water gourd, and a string of butterfly cocoons. John Cage and Lou Harrison also began to work with percussion in the 1930s.

⁸⁰ Cowell, "Towards Neo-Primitivism," *Modern Music* 10 (March-April 1933): 153. Another work for non-pitched percussion alone, Amadeo Roldán's *Ritmicas*, nos. 5 and 6, also saw its premier in 1930.

⁸¹ Grainger, "Music: a Commonsense View of All Types (Melbourne, 1934). Also see John Blacking, *"A Commonsense View of All Music": Reflections on Percy Grainger's Contribution to Ethnomusicology and Music Education* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987).

⁸² Carlos Chávez, "Revolt in Mexico."

Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique* had its New York premiere in 1927—McPhee had played piano in it along side Aaron Copland. That performance employed six xylophones, electric bells, two wood propellers, a metal propeller, tamtam, four bass drums, siren, ten pianos, and pianola (electric piano). For Antheil, the piece paid homage to the modern, “the primitive,” and the machine: to “America, Africa, and Steel.” In his 1923 Parisian debut Antheil had presented several works of percussive pianism on these themes: *Sonata Sauvage*, *Mechanisms*, and *Airplane Sonata*. He remarked, “I feel that in these few pages I have embraced all mankind, the fear, impossible hopes, and electricity of the unconscious from the primitive to the mind that dies in the airplane.”⁸³

By the late 1920s percussion had two seemingly contradictory associations, one with the jungle and the other to the increasingly motorized streets and skyscrapers of New York. Modernists found a hard, angular, and energetic imagery and an unemotional, brutal aesthetic common to both locations. This was not—as it was sometimes portrayed—through “discovery” of inherent similarities between their own world and that of “primitives.” These similitudes between the Machine Age and the Stone Age rather came into being through mutual differentiation from the “torpidity” of romanticism’s orchestral idiom. In the visual arts, the angular forms of skyscrapers and African masks paralleled the crisp timbres of percussion in their anti-emotional directness.

McPhee himself saw machinery as an inspiring object. He had been the student of Varèse at the time when the latter was writing *Ionisation*, and had even been labeled by a

⁸³ In this paragraph I rely on Oja, “Ballet Mécanique and International Modernist Networks,” chap. 5 in *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). The quote “America, Africa, and Steel” was a publicity statement that appeared in several publications, including “Goossens to Conduct ‘Ballet Mecanique’: Letter from Antheil Throws Light on Composer and His Musical Credo—How He Views Himself and Europe” *Musical Leader* 52 (24 February 1927), 5, quoted in Oja, 92. The statement “I feel that in these few pages,” is from a letter by Antheil to Bok, 5 April 1923, quoted in Oja, 91. Oja remarks that Antheil, “clearly perceived primitivism as one of the pistons in his hard-pounding hymn of praise to the machine” (p. 91).

critic for the *New York Sun* as a “young American futurist” as early as 1926.⁸⁴ Just before his departure for Bali in 1931, McPhee composed a piece titled *Mechanical Principles* (now lost),⁸⁵ which was performed in conjunction with a film by Ralph Steiner—ironically, there was a mechanical failure of the projection equipment during the showing. The next year, in a letter written from Paris after he had already lived six months in Bali, McPhee testified that mechanical aesthetics were presently at the forefront of his thoughts:

From [*Mechanical Principles*] on I have been trying to express through music an emotion resulting from contact with daily life—its noise, rhythm, energy, and mechanical daring. Do not think I mean program music. I have no more definite, concrete idea in mind than the construction of logical music whose rhythms derive from mechanics, whose tonal structure, while orderly and complete, is as complex as the structure of a large bridge.”⁸⁶

McPhee later found that aesthetic in Balinese music. In “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali” he described the music as “strangely rational”: “no voice in *gamelan* is without its rhythmic function” (he would later come to see it evidenced in classical genres but not in the “decay” of *kebyar*.) In the 1960 program notes to *Tabuh-tabuhan*, he defined the title as “a Balinese collective noun, meaning different drum rhythms, metric forms, gong punctuations, gamelans and music essentially percussive.”⁸⁷ In choosing this title and

⁸⁴ Quoted in *CTW*, 28-29.

⁸⁵ Oja (*CTW*, 48-51) has observed that both of McPhee’s piano compositions *Kinesis* (1930) and the *Invention* (1926) feature odd rhythmic groupings (usually of 3) that create shifting accents over the bar. These groupings are very similar to that which McPhee later emphasized about Balinese music, both in *Tabuh-tabuhan* and in the quote from *AMB* below.

⁸⁶ McPhee to Van Vechten, postmarked “4 [blurred] 1932, Paris,” quoted in *CTW*, 51-52.

⁸⁷ McPhee, note to *Tabuh-tabuhan: Toccata for Orchestra and 2 Pianos* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1960).

interpreting it as he did, McPhee stressed the logical, geometric, indeed mechanical design of Balinese music and its metallic and percussive instrumentation.

McPhee's scoring of *Tabuh-tabuhan* was reminiscent of the *Ballet Mécanique* and of Stravinsky's *Les Noces*.⁸⁸ *Tabuh-tabuhan*'s instrumentation included a standard symphony orchestra and a "nuclear gamelan," consisting of two pianos, celesta, xylophone, marimba, and glockenspiel. The scoring for multiple pianos is a particularly noteworthy feature, as it recalled both of those earlier works, as well as Poulenc's 1932 Concerto for Two Pianos, which had in fact alluded to Balinese gamelan. There was also a likely Balinese inspiration for McPhee's scoring hinted at in *A House in Bali*—McPhee recalled how the Balinese *gender* accompaniment to the shadow play had stirred his imagination: "Four musicians sat facing one another, and as hands moved with incredible rapidity up and down above the keys, I could only think of four perfectly co-ordinated little pianos" (*HIB*, 37). It would seem that in this way an ethnographic metaphor was conceived and then employed: the *gender wayang* McPhee heard in Bali reminded him of a current modernist genre of "perfectly co-ordinated" pianos; with *Tabuh-tabuhan* he brought this association home to modernists, reminding them of their own genre with the invocation of *gender*.

McPhee stated that Balinese music was perfectly coordinated, carefully structured, and "its chief strength is its rhythm" (*AMB*, 166). Balinese syncopations and cross-accented polymetric groupings acted as a kind of dissonance, taking the place of Western music's tonal dissonance. He argued that Balinese music's importance for the occidental

⁸⁸ On the association between Antheil and Stravinsky and the scoring of the *Ballet Mécanique* and *Les Noces* for electric pianola, see Glenn Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994), 322-338.

was in such complexities, which far outshone the rhythmic resources available to Western musicians. It would have been understood that this comparison was not only true of Bali versus the West: Balinese music would have been taken by most as an exemplar of a larger category of “primitive” musics. This attitude is reflected in Cowell’s 1933 categorical statement, “rhythm is more complex in aboriginal than in classic music.”⁸⁹

McPhee described Balinese music as rational in construction to the point that it was not only polyrhythmic at a local level, but contained elaborate polymetric structures. He transcribed a passage of a series of gestures in five (see Ex. 1). Above the staff he graphed a 4/4 conception of the passage, which showed that the groups of five ultimately come to rest at the downbeat in the fourth 4/4 measure. “Often,” he wrote, “[the Balinese orchestra] plays in unison highly syncopated passages which, although bewildering enough at first hearing, upon analysis resolve themselves like mathematical problems” (*AMB*, 168). He stated that this example was only the simplest example of its kind.



Ex. 1. “Shifting accents...that sound as though composed of units of five notes” (*AMB*, 168),

⁸⁹ Cowell, “Towards Neo-Primitivism,” 149.

McPhee saw a special affinity between rhythm in Balinese music and in many others, including jazz, and excluding European classical music. In a later article in *Modern Music*, “Eight to the Bar,” (1943), he argued that the syncopations of jazz did not originate in Africa, but rather were a pan-Asian phenomenon. The idea that jazz had originated in Africa was a faulty product of primitivism in its 1920s form:

The theory still survives that the syncopation peculiar to American jazz is a form of rhythmic expression that had its birth ‘on some Negro’s dull tomtom in Africa.’ The lingering obsession is not unconnected with the feverish cult of the Negro that flourished in the ‘twenties after the still earlier discovery of African sculpture. The idea, of course, is dated; it belongs to an era of art-galleries crammed with primitive carving, of Josephine Baker in Paris, the exploration of Harlem, *La Création du Monde*—a period or romantic anthropology long past.⁹⁰

If at this point McPhee distanced himself from the earlier primitivist movement, it is clear that he maintained a conception of a “primitive” category of people and music. The view he expressed here was that the syncopations found in jazz actually can be found in many parts of the world, in India, the Middle East, to a lesser extent in China, and to a great extent in Bali. In all these places there was music that displayed a common tendency to subdivide the 4/4 bar into uneven divisions of three and two eighth notes. McPhee found that the most basic and widespread manifestation of this tendency was the following:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} 1 & 2 & 3 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 1 & 2 \\ \hline 1 & & 2 & & 3 & & 4 & \end{array}$$

McPhee argued that this is a pattern of both “universality and antiquity” (p. 242). His precise conception of the matter is hazy, for at points he suggested that the pattern spread through cultural contact, which would seem to undercut his argument for its universality. On the side of universality, his comments suggest an at least vaguely Freudian view. He

⁹⁰ McPhee, “Eight to the Bar,” *Modern Music* 20, no. 4 (May-June 1943): 235.

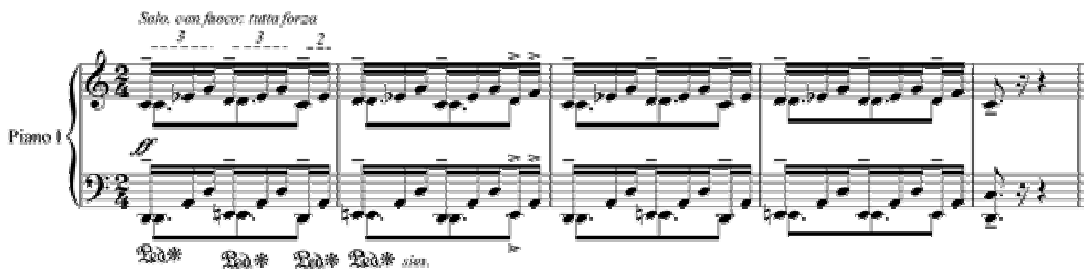
stated of the phenomenon of various performers performing different subdivisions of the 4/4 bar that

This is the very essence of polyrhythm. In the brief ostinato we see a basic rhythm, the march-step with its alternation of right-left, its relation to the heart-beat of contract-expand, eject-draw-in, given a secondary accentuation whose primary purpose is to negate the other, as though to conceal the weakness, deny the implications of exhaustion and death that lie in the second beat. (p. 238)

A belief in the psychic unity of mankind, which this analysis implied, was a feature of primitivist thought following Freud. Here, though, McPhee was not necessarily making a primitivist argument; on an explicit level he was divesting himself of primitivism, stating that the rhythm of interest was “a far cry from the wild tumultuous drumming of the primitive African groups. . .” (p. 242). He was making the case that the 3 3 2 rhythm, representative of the universal psyche, was the property of a particular segment of humanity, which stretched through Asia, into Africa by way of the Arabs, and onward to the Americas. To drive home this argument, he stated:

I never could get the Balinese to listen thirty seconds to any record containing culture-music of the West. “What noise!” they would exclaim. “Like wailing! And where is the beat?” But they would listen to one jazz record after another. They found them grotesque but comparatively intelligible. (p. 242)

This article provides some insight into the composition of *Tabuh-tabuhan*, for in that work rhythmic materials dividing the bar in this manner are densely layered. For those not familiar with Balinese music, many sections (such as that shown in example 2) might be rather be reminiscent of jazz.



Ex. 2. Syncopations of the 3 + 3 + 2 variety (movement 1 “Ostinatos,” mm. 49-52, piano I).

Perhaps McPhee intended a double allusion to Balinese music and jazz from the time of the work’s conception, or perhaps he observed that his Bali-inspired composition sounded jazz-like as he was composing it. In 1936 McPhee described the work to Cowell as “Bali-jazz-and-McPhee.”⁹¹ In 1960, McPhee would again identify the importance of jazz in the notes to the published score:

Many of the syncopated rhythms of Balinese music have a close affinity with those of Latin-American popular music and American jazz—a history in itself—and these have formed the basic impulse of the work from start to finish.⁹²

The correlation of Balinese and jazz as more-or-less equivalent influences (whether because they shared a historical link or represented a universal instinct) upon the modern composer had a polemical resonance. In “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali,” McPhee identified Americans, *not* Europeans, as able to successfully assimilate jazz

⁹¹ McPhee to Cowell, written from New York City, spring 1936, quoted in *CTW*, 100.

⁹² McPhee, note to *Tabuh-tabuhan* (1960).

influences into their compositions. Americans more than Europeans were connected to the living culture that jazz represented. Because of this, they were, by implication, in a position to connect with other influences, which to McPhee in their rhythmic materials and social functions were essentially the same as jazz:

Just how much, and in what manner a so-called primitive music can be utilized by the occidental composer is a question for each individual conscience. The difference between a pastiche and a creative work in which foreign material has been so absorbed by the artist as to become part of his equipment is something which has never been completely recognized. It can, however, be detected in the variety of influences which jazz has exercised on the composers of today. By Europeans jazz has never been convincingly assimilated or more than superficially felt; but it has entered the blood of the Americans and become a tonic whose stimulating virtues are well established. (*AMB*, 168)

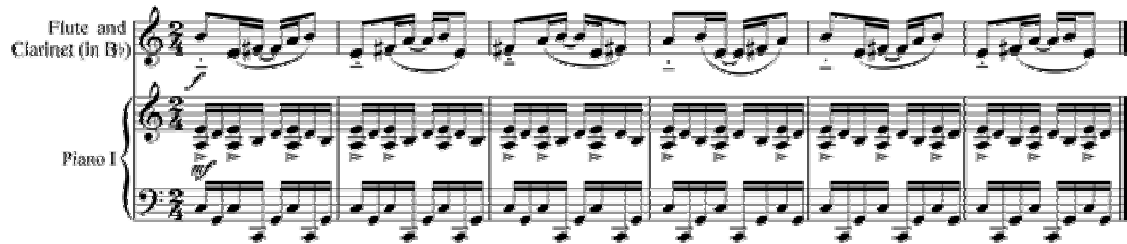
McPhee did not emphasize the important of pitch and scale for Balinese music as he did rhythm. He stated that, “Although the melodic contour is always sure and often exceedingly beautiful, the scales, perhaps because of their strong characteristic flavor, offer fewer possibilities to the occidental” (*AMB*, 169). He described Balinese music as making nearly indiscriminate use of the notes of the scale, usually of five notes. Each note of the scale could be used as a tonal center, thereby offering variety. He stressed however that, “The polyphonic nature of [gamelan’s] orchestration rises spontaneously from a musical idiom uncontaminated by any conception of harmony. A singularly aerial sonority results. . .” (*AMB*, 168), and postulated that “The absence of harmony or modulation illustrates clearly the inherent power of music to sustain itself through purity of line and vitality of rhythm” (*AMB*, 169).



Ex. 3. “The melodic outline is generally restricted to some form or other of a pentatonic scale. . .” (*AMB*, 169).

In McPhee’s application of the principle of “aerial sonority” in *Tabuh-tabuhan* there is an affinity with the pan-diatonicism that was currently in use among many modernist composers. Composer colleagues such as Copland and Chavez used the pandiatonic sound as a pan-American signifier.⁹³ It can be found in the opening measures of *Tabuh-tabuhan*, where the seven notes of the diatonic scale were distributed into three layers distinguished by timbre. The first in the flutes and clarinets, contained four pitches; the second and in the piano 1 right hand contained four-pitches, three of which were the same as those in group 1, so that together the two layers produced a 5-pitch sonority. The piano 1 left hand completed the diatonic collection, playing just the two remaining pitches. The total diatonic sonority had a Lydian quality, and yet the first two layers, audibly distinct through their differentiated timbres, spun out the “aerial sonorities” of a smaller pitch group. The piano right hand was indeed characteristic of Balinese patterning as found in McPhee’s transcriptions. The result was a sonorous effect that at once represented Balinese scales (especially in the Piano 1 right hand) and the tonal language of contemporary American composition.

⁹³ Pandiatonicism was defined by Nicolas Slonimsky in 1938 as the “technique in which all seven degrees of the diatonic scale are used freely in democratic equality.” Slonimsky wrote that “panpentatonicism grants a similar dispensation to the five notes of the pentatonic scale. . .”, and of panpentatonic tone cluster that “when projected against a perfect fifth in the bass, they create an attractive sonority of a modernistic panpentatonic chinoiserie” (*Music Since 1900*, 4th edition [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971], 1474-1475).



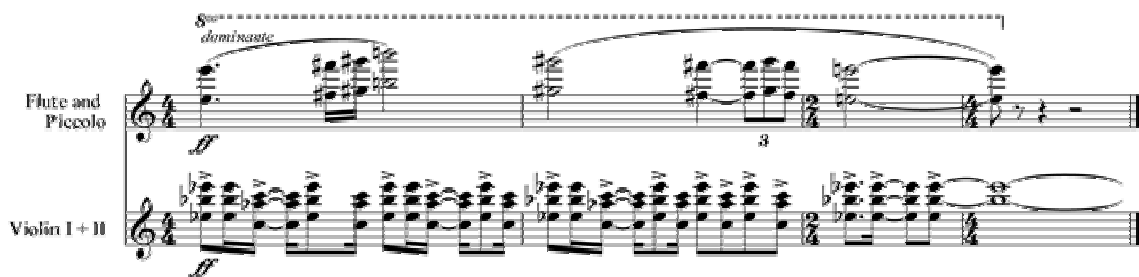
Ex. 4. Flute and Piano I figuration at the opening of *Tabuh-tabuhan* (mvt. 1 “Ostinatos,” mm. 1-6)

This layering of distinct small collections of four or five pitches is found throughout *Tabuh-tabuhan*. In some cases, as above, the total sonority that is the aggregate of all layers were diatonic, at other times more than 7 pitches appeared together, so that the sonority would become quite dissonant. One of the most startling moments of differentiated layering occurs in the second movement. This particular layering had a programmatic significance, as it depicted a common occurrence in Bali, which he described in “The Absolute Music of Bali”:

The festive note may even be dissonant and confused, for often four or more types of *gamelans* will be assembled within the temple walls—each with its separate idiom of music and instruments—to resound simultaneously at the climax of ritual, in a barbaric splendor of clashing tonalities. Here a *state of music* is required for a certain length of time, nothing more. (McPhee’s italics) (*AMB*, 165-66)

In *Tabuh-tabuhan* this gave McPhee an opportunity to experiment with the sort of poly-tonal composition in which layers of tonally and timbrally distinct material depicted a scene in which separate musics emanated from different sources. Example 5 shows a moment in the second movement (“Nocture”) in which two tonally and timbrally distinct sets of materials are set in polyphony. One represents a 4-tone *gamelan angklung* (pitches

A-flat, B-flat, C, and E-flat), the other represents the flute of an Arja (sung drama) performance (pitches E, F-sharp, G-sharp, B, and C-sharp). The two sets, while enharmonically forming the full seven diatonic pitches of an B-major scale, retain independence. The effect is that of two sound sources within the same environment. This is still a phenomenon of Balinese life (especially notable in *odalan* ceremonies, which mark the anniversaries of temples). The technique McPhee used was described as “full polyphony” by Cowell (in reference to the music of Ives).⁹⁴



Ex. 5. Movement 2, mm. 93-96. “A barbaric splendor of clashing tonalities”

On the topic of compositional process in Bali, McPhee referred specifically to the *kebyar* genre:

The present tendency, especially in the secular music, is to break up the old compositions and weld fragments or episodes from these into new works which, though they may lack the unity of the older music, glow with fresh life and vitality. (*AMB*, 165)⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Cowell referred to this technique in Ives’s music as “full polyphony.” He explained that Ives was inspired to develop the great independence of line that this technique permitted when hearing two marching bands pass while traveling in opposite directions. “American Composers IX: Charles Ives,” *Modern Music* 10, no. 1 (November-December 1932): 24-32.

⁹⁵ Responding to this statement, Oja has observed that in *Tabuh-tabuhan* McPhee emulated a Balinese method of composing: “*Tabuh-tabuhan*, then, marks the union of McPhee the composer and McPhee the ethnomusicologist. The work draws on many of McPhee’s transcriptions from Bali and also emulates the very process by which Balinese music is composed” (*CTW*, 104).

A few years later McPhee would have been unlikely to have spoken this positively about *kebyar*. As noted, he came to resent the Balinese tendency to break apart older styles and paste them together again haphazardly (as he would later bitterly describe the process). In 1935, however, he seems still to have regarded the compositional process of *kebyar* as interesting,⁹⁶ and this was likely because he recognized in it a similarity with the technique of pasting together texturally dissimilar fragments that was in currency among modernists. This rebellious manner of composing—rebellious in that it broke with traditional demands of continuity and unity—is traceable to Stravinsky, who in 1913 was already employing the technique in the *Rite of Spring*. Juxtaposition would become a Stravinsky trademark, exemplified in works such as the *Symphonies d'instruments à vent* (1920) and *Les Noces* (1921-23).⁹⁷ Antheil, Varèse, and others had their own manners of juxtaposing materials. Meanwhile the similar technique of montage was employed by contemporary film makers such as the Soviet Sergei Eisenstein, and collage and assemblage paralleled in painting and sculpture.

Tabuh-tabuhan made vivid this suggested similitude between Balinese and modernist juxtaposition. Transcribed themes and new inventions upon Balinese pitch and rhythmic materials succeeded each other rapidly, sometimes disjointedly. McPhee offered the Balinese explanation for this practice in the program notes:

⁹⁶ McPhee went so far as to state, “Only the most sacred and ceremonial music remains static and archaic—a sharp contrast to the extremely energetic and colorful modern technic” (*AMB*, 165).

⁹⁷ On the use of the technique in *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, see Edward T. Cone, “Stravinsky: The Progress of a Method” in *Perspectives on Schoenberg and Stravinsky*, ed. Benjamin Boretz and Edward T. Cone (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), 155-94. Cone theorizes that *Symphonies* has three phases: stratification, interlock, and synthesis. McPhee’s technique in *Tabuh-tabuhan* seems to be similar, though less systematic.

In modern-day Bali, it is common among the youngest generation to make compositions in a new form called *kebyar*, making good use of melodies and motives chosen from the ample repertory of classical music.⁹⁸

With this statement, he implied that his own use of Balinese melodies and motives was not mere pastiche but was an engagement with Balinese music-making throughout, to the very level of compositional process. McPhee's audience would have heard musical montage, with which they were by then more than familiar, and have been invited to believe that they were hearing *kebyar*. The very opening of the first movement ruptures with juxtaposition by measure 9 (ex. 6). Though both forming the same diatonic collection, the two juxtaposed blocks have different intervallic contents. Major 2nds and minor 3rds in the block of winds and Piano I evoke a sort of "slendro," while minor 2nds and major 3rds in the xylophone, Piano II, and violins, evoke "pelog."

The musical score for Ex. 6 is written in 3/4 time and consists of four staves. The first staff is for Flute and Clarinet (in Bb), the second for Xylophone, the third for Piano I, and the fourth for Piano II. The score is divided into two main sections. The first section, measures 7-11, is marked 'molto ritmico' and features a melodic line in the winds and a rhythmic pattern in the xylophone and piano. The second section, measures 12-16, is marked 'molto secco' and features a melodic line in the piano and a rhythmic pattern in the xylophone and piano.

Ex. 6. Two juxtaposed textural blocks (*Tabuh-tabuhan*, movement 1, mm. 7-11)

⁹⁸ McPhee, Program note for the premiere of *Tabuh-tabuhan*, 4 September, 1936, Orquesta Sinfónica de México, Mexico City, reproduced in Mueller, "Bali, *Tabuh-Tabuhan*," 170.

As with the other metaphors that I have discussed, that implied by juxtaposition in *Tabuh-tabuhan* formed a union between a technique drawn from a “primitive” culture, and an already developed trope of modernist, primitivist composition. As such, the persuasiveness of this union of two “present tendencies,” Bali’s and modernism’s, lay in the seamless, un-noteworthy way in which Balinese music became refined into material that could act as supporting evidence for modernism’s already formed view of “the primitive,” and further of modernism’s view of its primitivist self. At the same time, such visions of “the primitive” did not simply reinforce static concepts and styles but contributed to the continual shifting of concepts and styles of modernism. It is in this way that the process of influence of foreign musics upon modernism can be most clearly understood.

For McPhee, then, it was the capacity of an observation about Balinese music, such as *kebyar*, to bolster modernism’s own practices that made it worthy of mention in this context. Other observations about Balinese music—not false but necessarily limited—would go unmentioned. In the context of *Modern Music* such representations would have not only been beside the point, but impossible.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ An interesting contrast to “The ‘Absolute’ Music of Bali” can be seen in McPhee’s article of one year later, “The Balinese Wayang Koelit and Its Music,” *Djawa* 16 (1936): 1-34. The latter was not written for modernist composers, and its content is different though presumably no less allegorical.

Conclusions: McPhee in Retrospect

In a 1993 review of Oja's biography of McPhee, the composer Larry Polansky¹⁰⁰ has questioned the importance of McPhee's compositional legacy. Unenthusiastic about the prospect of a McPhee revival, Polansky argues: "McPhee's 'marginalization' comes from the fact that many of his pieces are in rather strongly established styles, and his most 'famous' work, *Tabuh-tabuhan*, has often been thought of (rightly or wrongly) as an example of how not to incorporate non-Western elements into Western art music."¹⁰¹ It is not really surprising that McPhee, who was once an arbiter of, as he said, "the right way to utilize exotic material," would through the vicissitudes of stylistic change in 20th-century composition become the very cautionary example used by later arbiters. As seen, the development of stylistic trends in 20th-century composition has been continuously inflected with the concern to portray ever more authentically foreign musics; at the same time, I have attempted to show that among 20th-century composers what has been said to be the "right" or the "wrong" way to implement non-Western materials was often determined by the speaker's position on stylistic arguments that were internal to his/her own Western milieu. Style and authenticity have been inextricably interdependent in the twentieth century.

¹⁰⁰ Polansky has an extensive training in Javanese music and is a performer of *gender*, a traditional Javanese instrument. His theoretical interests "include just and experimental intonations." See Carter Scholz: "Polansky, Larry" *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 6/6/2008), <http://www.grovemusic.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu>. Also see his homepage <http://eamusic.dartmouth.edu/~larry/>.

¹⁰¹ Larry Polansky, review of *Colin McPhee: Composer in Two Worlds* by Carol Oja, *Ethnomusicology* 37, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 439.

As an illustration I will quote two recent arbiters at length, each a critic of *Tabuh-tabuhan*. First is the British composer Douglas Young,¹⁰² who praises *Tabuh-tabuhan* as outstanding among compositions representing Asian musics. This is because *Tabuh-tabuhan* represents the “true East,” which Young describes in terms reminiscent of the modernists’ of the 1920s and ‘30s:

Compare McPhee’s work with another orchestral monster which purports to be Oriental in inspiration—Messiaen’s *Turangalîla* (1948). Despite post-dating *Tabuh-tabuhan* by more than a decade, *Turangalîla* looks back to an essentially 19th-century view of the East. What Messiaen offers us in an orgy of exotic sexuality in which hallucinogenic phantoms from Wagner, Tristan, Edgar Allan Poe, sundry Eastern Philosophies, and myriad upon myriad of *oiseaux*, congeal into a pseudo-mystical union, whilst embracing little more than the flesh: the perfect work for latter day d’Annunzios.

What Messiaen’s Hindo-Kitsch actually gives us is Western man’s (more or less) repressed desires projected onto the East, which he then conveniently labels ‘mysterious, exotic mystical, intuitive’ etc.... So long as one talks of the East in terms of meditation, levitation, archetypes, Yin-Yang, I-Ching, Mantra/Tantra, Zen (‘...say it and feel New’) everyone seems perfectly cock-a-hoop. The greater the hocus-pocus the wilder the euphoria. But if anyone dare present a different picture of the East, woe betide them.

That is exactly what McPhee did.

Tabuh-tabuhan is the obverse of the 19th-century European view of the East: McPhee gives us energy in place of enervation; reality, with all its brashness, in place of ‘mysticism’; health and reason in place of a fetishism of insanity and the extreme; ‘the lineaments of gratified desire’ rather than an exotic voyeurism.

And all this in 1936: the date is faintly shocking, as we realize how today, 50 years on, the 19th-century view of the East is if anything more pervasive than it was then.¹⁰³

Young criticizes Messiaen and others who perpetuate the “19th-century European view of the East” for projecting onto the East images that were manufactured in the West. Yet Young’s 1986 comments make clear that, if the “19th-century view of the East” is

¹⁰² Young has been influenced by Indonesian music; his *The Listeners* (1967) incorporates “gamelan sonorities.” See Peter Hill, “Young, Douglas,” *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 6/6/2008), <http://www.grovemusic.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu>.

¹⁰³ Douglas Young, “Colin McPhee’s Music: (II) ‘Tabuh-Tabuhan’,” *Tempo* 159 (Dec 1986): 18. Young has also noted that *Tabuh-tabuhan* makes creative use of metaphor between Balinese and Western idioms.

going strong, the 1930s view of the East is alive as well. What Young stresses about the rightness of *Tabuh-tabuhan* was not its faithfulness to any particular Balinese practices (though he did offer a description of a generalized “East” to which he felt it was faithful), but rather how it avoided the errors of other composers. McPhee had made proper stylistic choices that would necessarily ensure his works fidelity to the “East.” Young describes these correct stylistic choices through their distinction from false ones, elsewhere noting that *Tabuh-tabuhan* was “not for flatulent Germanic orchestras.”¹⁰⁴

Such statements can be understood in terms of how conflicting definitions of the East serve different interests, bolstering or diminishing different stylistic legacies, and flattering or insulting different ideological positions. Young praises McPhee for giving us “energy,” “reality,” “health,” and “gratified desire,” and is “shocked” that such a clear vision of the East could have been conceived as early as 1936, close as it was to the nineteenth-century. He argued that McPhee was brave for giving us the real East, in spite of the unpopularity of such a vision. Meanwhile, I have argued that McPhee went to great lengths to represent Bali precisely according to the image that was popular among his modernist colleagues in the 1930s, by whose approval McPhee would have measured his success.

In a review of Carol Oja’s biography of McPhee, the British composer, musicologist, and “educationist” Wilfred Mellers¹⁰⁵ rejects *Tabuh-tabuhan*’s vision of Bali. Meller’s assessment is the opposite of Young’s, and yet its approach is similar. Mellers describes

¹⁰⁴ Young, “Colin McPhee’s Music,” 17.

¹⁰⁵ See Leslie East and Gordon Rumson, “Mellers, Wilfrid, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 6/6/2008), <http://www.grovemusic.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu>.

the work's faults through distinction from Lou Harrison's Piano Concerto for Keith Jarrett, another work influenced by gamelan (Javanese). For Mellers, the specific problem was that McPhee's work was for orchestra and pianos in twelve-tone equal temperament. Equal temperament was not faithful to Balinese music, which Mellers suggested involved just intonation:

...One has only to compare McPhee's *Tabuh Tabuhan* with the magically beautiful Piano Concerto written by Lou Harrison for Keith Jarrett in 1985 to realize that McPhee's piece founders on a deceit. For although the main reason for the superiority of the Harrison work is that he is the better composer, there is also a matter of principle involved. McPhee, transcribing Balinese gamelan for equal-tempered modern instruments, destroys the music's soul—which is inherent in its relatively *just* intonation. Any system of temperament must be to a degree a fall from grace, though some declensions are steeper than others. There is little evidence in this book that McPhee, though he had written expertly of the traditional tunings, was much bothered by their philosophical and even physiological implications. This is why *Tabuh Tabuhan*, whatever its virtues, remains a part of what Steve Reich called “the old exoticism trip”; whereas Harrison's concerto in which the piano is tuned in a subtle compromise between East and West, is an aural revelation to, and a spiritual experience for, us divided and distracted twentieth-century creatures.

Not [*sic*] is it entirely fanciful to relate this technical matter to the disastrous story of McPhee's life. While he intermittently exhibited a charm that beguiled well-wishers other than his long-suffering wife, his jeremiads about the state of the wicked world (especially in reference to his own talents), his self-absorption and his infantile petulance prove increasingly tiresome.... Drink may have been his craven answer to the neglect he thought he suffered from—and to the loss of the beautiful brown boys of Bali, who were no doubt as solacing as the tintinnabulations of their bells and gongs. Of course it wasn't the sexually permissive Balinese but McCarthyite WASPs who eventually drove him from his island paradise.¹⁰⁶

The issue of whether Harrison's just intonation is authentic to Javanese music will be taken up at length in chapter 4; I will only mention here that it has received serious challenge. Mellers's condemnation of *Tabuh-tabuhan* would seem to be a case in which the authenticity—and indeed the morality—of a modernist work has been assessed *a*

¹⁰⁶ Wilfrid Mellers, “On the Old Exoticism Trip,” review of *Colin McPhee: Composer in Two Worlds*, by Carol Oja, *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 Mar. 1991.

priori by terms that were entirely specific to the community of composers in America and had nothing to do with musical concerns among Balinese. Mellers favored the work of Harrison, and his understanding of what was true about Balinese gamelan versus what was merely fantasy “exoticism” was shaped by Harrison’s work.

Polansky also preferred the work of Harrison to McPhee. He found McPhee’s method of transcribing Balinese music for the piano absurd, remarking that the transcriptions “completely obliterate tempo fluctuation, timbre, tuning, dynamics, musical and cultural context, ensemble variation, and most importantly, the musical and performance variations of the original.” He ultimately found that McPhee transcribed little besides “some kind of approximation of rhythms and melodic contours,” and observed that, “the only thing [McPhee’s transcriptions] made possible for ‘the West’ was to hear these transcriptions themselves.”¹⁰⁷ Polansky preferred the transcriptions of Harrison, among others.

I would argue that what McPhee’s transcriptions make it possible to hear must be understood as a dialogical matter. Their content is located inevitably along the ideological trajectory between himself and his audience. What his compositions say, and what is beyond their capacity to say, can be examined as a result of the coincidence of his own horizon and that of his audience—if McPhee’s transcriptions say less than they used to, that is because there has been a shift in what his audiences want and are able to hear. As will be seen, Harrison’s representations are no different.

Again, in such statements of “right” and “wrong,” even if what is preferred is based on a sincere commitment to authenticity of representation, the way authenticity is

¹⁰⁷ Polansky, review of *Colin McPhee*, 440.

assessed is a fact of the current science of representation in the field, which is in turn determined by aesthetic concerns of the field, and by other internal arguments. In each of the above critiques, assessments of the quality of McPhee's composition were entwined with accusations, pointed one way or the other, that somebody operating under a false and pernicious musical aesthetic had misrepresented the Balinese. Both Young and Mellers took the primitivist position that authentic Balinese music was the same as an authentic human music: this was Young's "energy," "reality," "health," "reason," and "gratified desire" and Mellers's just intonation. Both writers found in their respective false representations conventions associated with Western thinking in the 19th century: Young found depictions of the Orient as orgiastic, sensational, and mysterious and Mellers found equal temperament. In spite of their complaints against the nineteenth century, both of these late-20th-century writers saved their most vitriolic criticisms for early-20th-century predecessors. Both Young and Mellers went further, mentioning moral, especially sexual, weakness in their critiques: Young claimed that Messiaen's "pseudo-mysticism" actually "embraces little more than the flesh" and represents "Western man's (more or less) repressed desires projected onto the East," while Mellers commented on McPhee's "craven" drinking and his interest in "the beautiful brown boys of Bali."

With the intense intellectualism of modernist composition has come a phenomenon of aesthetic disagreements that are not merely quarrels over whose music sounds better. Aesthetics have become intimately tied to a range of ideological issues touching upon national and international politics, sex and sexuality, cultural representation, class relations, and science and technology. These issues are frequently so bound together that

to be a composer with a style is to be a total moral being, a person with a distinct position on truth in the world, whose professional purpose is not only to find performers of his/her music but also to persuade others of a vision of the world.

In the following chapters we will see two examples of such total visions. Both Henry Cowell and Lou Harrison went to great lengths in crafting their music to suit their world and crafting their world to suit their music. And, as with McPhee and so many other 20th-century composers, for Cowell and Harrison non-Western musics played an integral role in the construction and maintenance of that vision. Cowell will be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter III: Henry Cowell and the “Whole World of Music”

Difference and hybrids are good he said
And agreed that people have lived before
And not been fools because of that, and that
They’ve lived in other places too and not
Been fools because of that. No single way
Suffices now, and knowing at least one
Other music well he felt illumines
Mind and heart as Mozart thought of travel,
That it is to an artist essential.

--Lou Harrison, from “Tens on Remembering Henry Cowell”

In *Beyond Exoticism* Timothy Taylor argues that Henry Cowell was ideologically in sync with the early-twentieth century impulse of cultural relativism, meaning that he advocated an understanding of musical meaning and value as variable to cultural context. Taylor aligns him with the anthropologist Franz Boas, “who was important in overturning the old model of evolutionism,”¹⁰⁸ and states that in the writing of his *United Quartet* (1936) Cowell was “armed with Boasian notions of culture and cultural relativism” (p. 110). As evidence, Taylor offers quotes by Cowell that are suggestive of this relativist attitude. In Cowell’s 1935 article “The Scientific Approach to Non-European Music,” he stated that understanding such music, “can be reached only upon the basis of a more extensive and profound knowledge firstly, of the technical processes and critical standard involved, and secondly, of the role of music in the social system from which it has

¹⁰⁸ Timothy D. Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 107.

sprung.”¹⁰⁹ Taylor states that it was Cowell’s position “that musics should be studied not only from the standpoint of science,” but also (now quoting Cowell):

from the point of view of the peoples themselves. An attempt should be made to discover which element of music is most emphasized by the particular tribe in question, and what the native conventions are with regard to it. (p. 62)

Taylor also quotes Cowell saying that the new-primitivist stylistic movement he visualized was

not an attempt to imitate primitive music, but rather to draw on those materials common to the music of all the peoples of the world, to build a new music particularly related to our own century.¹¹⁰

I agree with Taylor’s assessment: Cowell was clearly sympathetic to the relativist style of thinking and participated whole-heartedly in its advocacy of cultural tolerance. And yet, looking closely at the quotations provided by Taylor, there are words that do not seem to conform to relativism as it is commonly conceived today. For instance Cowell claimed that a “scientific” knowledge of non-European musics could be arrived upon. Another example is his advocacy for the consideration of which “elements” of music were valued by particular tribes. As will be seen, in spite of his relativistic ideals, Cowell also held notions about music as a phenomenon that might be studied objectively, and about which understandings might be reached in terms of absolute, non-relative truths. Cowell’s model researcher was a “scientist” investigating “elements,” which, though they might be differently valued by different peoples, had an objectively observable existence independent of their valuation.

¹⁰⁹ Henry Cowell, “The Scientific Approach to Non-European Music,” *Music Vanguard* I (summer 1935): 62.

¹¹⁰ Cowell, “Towards Neo-Primitivism,” *Modern Music* 10 (March-April 1933): 151; quoted in Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism*, 106.

Also there is Cowell's claim in the above quotation that he was not interested in imitating "primitive" music. In spite of this disclaimer about imitation, Cowell maintained that there was such a thing as a "primitive" person and a "primitive" music. The notion of the "primitive" was the centerpiece of the cultural evolutionist conception of culture, which Boas had done so much to dismantle in *The Mind of Primitive Man*. Though Boas, Mead, and other anthropologists did refer to non-literate peoples as "primitives," as will be seen, Cowell's use of the term was far more deeply entwined with evolutionist notions than were theirs.¹¹¹

Thus, Cowell's views on musical difference were in two respects the very antitheses of what is today commonly conceived of as relativism. First, his views on the variability of musical values were founded upon and limited by strict principles that he conceived of as scientific and absolute—in other words, *not* relative to culture. He presented these views in detail in his treatises *New Musical Resources* and *The Nature of Melody*,¹¹² and also referred to them in piecemeal throughout his many articles. Second, he conceived of all the musics of the world as representing different stages of a common historical developmental line, a view that is commonly referred to as cultural evolutionism.¹¹³

Though today it is often remarked, as Taylor does, that the historical rise of cultural

¹¹¹ David Paul ("From American Ethnographer to Cold War Icon: Charles Ives through the Eyes of Henry and Sidney Cowell," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 59, no. 2 [summer 2006]: 399-458) has argued that the influence of Boasian thinking on Cowell, at least until 1932, was minimal. In spite of being appointed in 1930 to the faculty of the New School for Social Research, the faculty of which as a whole pursued Boasian methods, "his correspondence bears no trace of the vibrant discourse about the social sciences that was taking place there" (p. 423).

¹¹² *New Musical Resources* (New York, London: A. A. Knopf, 1930) (hereafter cited as *NMR*) and *The Nature of Melody* (hereafter cited as *NOM*), unpublished manuscript held at the Henry Cowell Collection of the New York Public Library (hereafter referred to as Cowell Coll.).

¹¹³ Evolutionism was sometimes grounded in racist ideas about the different capacities of different peoples to become civilized. Cowell did not subscribe to this version of evolutionism, but rather to what Martin refers to as the "civilization paradigm."

relativism in the early to mid twentieth century represented a rejection of cultural evolutionism, I find that in Cowell's case the two were aspects of a single, coherent viewpoint on music and difference.¹¹⁴ His evolutionist and relativist views, along with his scientific theories, were mutually supporting.

Aspects of Cowell's views were shared by many colleagues, and were reflective of contemporary trends in the social sciences. A reconsideration of Cowell's views, alongside those of Charles Seeger, Joseph Yasser, and Joseph Schillinger, will help to provide a more nuanced picture of the shifts in twentieth-century theories of music and difference. It also shows that many of Cowell's statements about non-Western musics proceeded as much from the scientific and evolutionist aspects of his inquiries (which might today be held in great skepticism by ethnomusicologists) as from his relativistic side.

This investigation of Cowell's theories of music and difference opens up new possibilities for the understanding of the motivations and planning of his compositions. In this chapter, I also discuss his *United Quartet* (1936), in which Cowell proposed to be moving toward a musical style transcendent of culture. I discuss how he staked this universalist claim for the piece within his relativist, evolutionist, and positivist theories.

Through detailed consideration of the concepts that Cowell used to understand worldwide

¹¹⁴ Martin notes: "The culture-based paradigm came somewhat later than the other two [which were racialist and non-racialist versions of evolutionism], and was formed partly in reaction against some of their principles and implications. Its advocates attempted to develop a relativistic, non-ethnocentric approach, avoiding racial essentialism and judgmental comparisons and hierarchies of any kind. The specific culture, conceived of as an integrated unit with its own unique history, was the determinant of character, institutions, mores, and what Westerners perceived as difference" (*The Languages*, 23). As will be seen, Cowell's point of view was in some respects characteristic of Martin's culture-based paradigm and in some respects characteristic of the second, non-racialist evolutionist paradigm. Even when Cowell advocated for the rejection of hierarchies of "higher" and "lower" levels of civilizations, he continued to express his views in evolutionist terms.

musical difference it becomes possible to avoid reductive assessments of the authenticity of Cowell's compositional influences by non-Western musics. On the one hand we need not uncritically accept Cowell's claims about his compositions, such as his having achieved a universal musical style in the *United Quartet*, for we may critique the terms by which Cowell claimed their truth. On the other hand, we need not dismiss Cowell's compositions as exoticist fantasies (or as "world music kitsch" as John Corbett has described Cowell's 1957 *Persian Set*¹¹⁵), for we may see that they proceeded from earnest studies, and were, at least on the terms Cowell set out, authentic.

In this chapter I attempt to paint as completely as possible Cowell's vision of music and culture and of his own special role as an experimentalist composer. I will explain what Cowell meant when he used terms such as musical "elements," "resources," "experiment," "melody," "rhythm," "development," "primitive," "Oriental," and "peoples." His use of these terms was fairly consistent and reflects a tightly connected (though not "air-tight") set of views on music and difference. Cowell made his most explicit statements of his theories on music and culture in his treatises, but nowhere did he state them in as full a form as I do here. For me they have come into focus through examination of a broad selection of his publications. It may be that some aspects of what I describe were too fundamental to Cowell's way of thinking for him to articulate. It may also be that certain aspects of Cowell's views were so broadly held in his intellectual circles that he did not see the need to articulate them explicitly.

¹¹⁵ John Corbett, "Experimental Oriental: New Music and other Others," in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000), 172. "Like [Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* or Ravel's *Bolero*, the *Persian Set*] has an air of pastichery and world-music kitsch about it."

I will begin by describing succinctly Cowell's views on music and difference. I will follow this outline of Cowell's views with thematic subsections, in each of which I will discuss the development of these views in overlapping periods of Cowell's career. This chronological organization makes visible the subtle shifts in Cowell's views. The focus of my present study ends around 1940. After that point Cowell's interests took a new turn, which, even though they continued to build upon the lines traced here, raise substantially different issues, and will require separate treatment. In the conclusion to this chapter I will briefly discuss those later interests, and how they were elaborations upon, rather than departures from those of his earlier career.

An Outline of Cowell's Views on Music, Experiment, and Culture

Fairly early in Cowell's career he fixed upon conceptions of musical materials as "resources" and "elements." He took on as the principal model for the composer that of an "experimenter," in the sense of a scientist who tests resources or examines elements, and both creates and discovers for the material advancement of society. He held a particular understanding of the nature of music. On the one hand, it was a complex and creative medium with widely varying formal possibilities; on the other it was always constructed upon certain unvarying elemental bases, the potentials and limitations of which lay latent within them. In any particular musical piece these various resources might be developed or not.

Besides the model of the "experimenter," for Cowell a second way to study the potential for development of musical resources scientifically was through study of the world's musical cultures. He believed that in any particular culture certain resources

would have been communally developed, while others would have not. For instance, some cultures were highly sophisticated in their use of rhythm, while others were sophisticated in harmony. This fact is critical to understanding the idiosyncratic nature of Cowell's relativism: he saw that the musics of different cultures were differently valuable, not because there could be no absolute field of musical values (i.e. not because all musical values are ultimately culturally based), but because different cultures had, through time, developed differently within a vast but theoretically unified field of musical possibilities. Cultures were, in a sense, workshops for the development of musical resources, with different cultures having specialized in different "sub-fields" of musical development (e.g. rhythm, melody, and harmony). While no single culture had advanced beyond all the others in every area of development, it certainly could be held that some cultures were more advanced than others in a given area. Each culture was advanced on its own terms, and it could logically be said, given this singular field for assessing advancement implied in Cowell's writings, that all cultures were equally advanced.

This question of differences in cultural advancement points to another aspect of Cowell's relativism that may seem idiosyncratic when opposed to what was later articulated as cultural relativism by anthropologists such as Melville Herskovitz (I will discuss Herskovitz in the next chapter). Cowell understood all presently existing cultures as occupying different historical positions relative to each other. The sort of advancement a culture displayed could be taken as an indication of its position in a unilinear scheme of worldwide cultural evolution, with the most "primitive" cultures exhibiting the greatest advancement in rhythm, and with Western culture exhibiting greatest advancement in

harmony.¹¹⁶ To be clear, this meant that a “primitive” culture would necessarily be historically undeveloped—meaning that it represented more-or-less a former cultural state of now more “civilized” societies—and yet, in terms of rhythmic resources, it would be the richest. Any culture, wherever it was located along this single historical line, could be said to be as rich as any other in musical resources. That Cowell held these evolutionist views may today strike readers as surprising, since it is often remarked that cultural relativism was a movement that aimed at refuting evolutionism, and ultimately succeeded in supplanting it.

The role of the experimental composer then was to develop resources, to improve musical technology, and to do so either through meticulous first-hand experiment with the elements of music or through anthropological scrutiny of the products of other cultures, with an eye toward discovering how those products demonstrated local means of developing elements, which were theoretically universal in applicability. This could lead the composer in a great variety of directions, and so it followed that very different projects by different composers ought to be regarded as equally valid: one composer might develop certain elements and another composer different ones. This was the

¹¹⁶ It may seem on the surface that Cowell’s simultaneous cultural relativism and cultural evolutionism is highly contradictory and idiosyncratic. Cultural relativism is often spoken of as being the antithesis of and having historically replaced cultural evolutionism (e.g. this statement by James Clifford: “Rejecting both evolutionism and the overly broad entities of race and civilization, the idea of culture posited the existence of local, functionally integrated units.” *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), 273. Cowell’s understanding of culture was pluralist in a sense, but was not designed as a repudiation of ideas of evolution and civilization, and in fact incorporated those paradigms. It may be that Cowell’s understanding is more typical of an era of theorists who conceived of culture as both plural and unilinear.

grounding for Cowell's pluralist views on modern composition and his own incredibly plural compositional output.¹¹⁷

Cowell's theories served his modernist project that was pluralist but not exactly relativistic as the term is conceived today. Cowell's modernism, conceived as experimentalism, was characterized by rather absolutist scientific values of discovery and progress. His goals were, in a word, positivistic; he was dedicated to advancement in the understanding of materials whose significance lay immanent within them. They were not, however, socially disinterested. As a neutral discoverer, Cowell's composer/scientist was in a position to offer critiques of society and offer suggestions for social development.

Cowell could, at certain times, conceive of musical interest as dependent upon contingent values, and at other times assume interest to be inherent to the musical elements. He would, at certain times, take evolutionist views, at others decry evolutionist thinking. These contradictions demonstrate both the enormous breadth of his intellect and also, perhaps, that his knowledge was somewhat disarticulated. Here I am, however, focusing on the logic that unified these seeming contradictions, even while respecting that this logic cannot sufficiently explain them all.

¹¹⁷ Steven Johnson notes that Cowell produced "nearly one thousand compositions in a diverse array of genres and styles. Indeed, the most consistent thing about his work is its lack of consistency. A thoroughly abstract, dissonant piece may follow a simple diatonic one. The same piece may harbor modernist noise in one hand and a modal folk tune in the other, or a piece built with traditional harmonic materials may exhibit radically new formal concepts. Works based on American vernacular, baroque concerto grosso, and Japanese *gagaku* traditions may appear in close proximity; and Javanese *gamelan* and Latin-American dance styles may appear in the same piece at the same time." See Johnson, "'World of Ideas': The Music of Henry Cowell," in *The Whole World of Music: A Henry Cowell Symposium*, ed. David Nichols (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), 16.

New Musical Resources

In 1919 Cowell finished a draft of what would be his first book, *New Musical Resources*.¹¹⁸ It was an assemblage of ideas he had developed under the guidance of Charles Seeger at Berkeley, and some of the ideas were Seeger's own.¹¹⁹ The book also owed much to Schönberg's *Harmonielehre*, but as Cowell saw it his own book went further in developing a rational and systematized theory of the many expanded resources of modern musicians: "[Schönberg's treatise] explained many moderately complex harmonies by combining more chromatic passing tones and pointing out some well-known primary overtone relationships; but his work fails to explain music as involved as Schönberg's own compositions".¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ *New Musical Resources* is considered by some to be one of the most important theoretical treatises of the 20th century. Kyle Gann has remarked that "it is more relevant today than it has ever been before. Whether a composer starts out reading it (and it should be required reading for undergraduate composers at every university in America) or discovers it further on down the road, the book stands as a monumental guidepost pointing the way to fascinating new territories of musical experience." Gann finds that *NMR* predicted the innovations of post-war composers such as Messiaen, Boulez, Stockhausen, and Babbitt, particularly their subjection of rhythm to the same controls as pitch. Whether any of them were directly influenced by Cowell is unknown, and none of them credited him. Gann also lists a host of living composers who have been more directly influenced by *NMR*: James Tenney, Ben Johnston, La Monte Young, Peter Garland ("perhaps Cowell's most direct compositional descendent"), John Luther Adams, David First, Larry Polansky, Ben Neill, Rhys Chatham, Glenn Branca, Mikel Rouse, Michael Gordon, and Gann himself. See Gann, "Subversive Prophet: Henry Cowell as Theorist and Critic," in *The Whole World of Music*, 186-89.

¹¹⁹ In its division of music into these two aspects, Cowell's treatise resembles that of Seeger, "Tradition and Experiment in (the New) Music," published in Charles Seeger, *Studies in Musicology II, 1929-1979*, ed. Anne M. Pescatello (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994). Their discussions also share a division of music into two realms, one of pitch and one of rhythm, and the development of an innovative approach to the latter (which they both considered to be relatively undeveloped) in analogy with more commonplace theoretical treatments of the former. See also Taylor A. Greer, "The Dynamics of Dissonance in Seeger's Treatise and Crawford's Quartet," *Understanding Charles Seeger, Pioneer in American Musicology* (Urbana and Chicago, Univ. of Illinois Press, 1999), 13-28. Seeger also fashioned a theory of musical relativity after Einstein's theory. See Bell Young, "Modern Physics to Modern Musicology, in *Understanding Charles Seeger*, 172-183. Young's description of Seeger's theory draws from Seeger's writings of the 1950s and later, quite a bit after the publication of Cowell's *New Musical Resources*.

¹²⁰ *NMR*, xv. On Cowell's instruction at Berkeley, and the influences he received from various professors there, see Michael Hicks's beautifully written, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian* (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2002), 64-79 (hereafter cited as *HCB*). The basing of an entire system of harmony

New Musical Resources articulates much of what was outlined above. The text advanced a picture of and a model for contemporary composition whereby it could be regarded as more-or-less scientific—or at least as having a wing, necessary to the field as a whole, dedicated to its development along scientific lines. This involved an understanding of music as constituted of isolatable elements that could be objectively perceived and analyzed and usefully exploited. The observable, testable aspect of music would exist independently of the values driving its creation and reception.

Cowell explained that through the study of overtones he had arrived at a “theory of musical relativity”: “It is discovered that the sense of consonance, dissonance, and discord is not fixed, so that it must be immovably applied to certain combinations, but is relative” (*NMR*, xvii). The combinations of tones associated with the lower end of the overtone series were those most readily understood as consonant. As tones of the upper reaches of the series were added, the complexity of the sound increased, from consonance into dissonance, and finally into discord.

and rhythm on the overtone series, which was the principal features of *New Musical Resources*, was an idea that Cowell received from his professors, including Seeger.

NEW MUSICAL RESOURCES

| <i>Notes of Overtone Major Notes Scale (Read up.)</i> | <i>Intervals</i> | <i>Vibration Index (on base of 16)</i> | <i>Serial Numbers of Par- tials *</i> |
|---|------------------|--|---|
|---|------------------|--|---|

| | | | |
|---------|--------------------|-------------|---|
| c.....C | Large major second | 128 = 8(16) | 8 |
| b | | | |

| | | | |
|------|-------------------|-------------|---|
| (Bb) | Small minor third | 112 = 7(16) | 7 |
|------|-------------------|-------------|---|

| | | | |
|---------|-------------|------------|---|
| a | | | |
| g.....G | Minor third | 96 = 6(16) | 6 |
| f | | | |

| | | | |
|---------|-------------|------------|---|
| e.....E | Major third | 80 = 5(16) | 5 |
| d | | | |

| | | | |
|---------|----------------|------------|---|
| c.....C | Perfect fourth | 64 = 4(16) | 4 |
| b | | | |

| | | | |
|---------|---------------|------------|---|
| a | | | |
| g.....G | Perfect fifth | 48 = 3(16) | 3 |
| f | | | |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| e | | | |
| d | | | |

| | | | |
|---------|----------------|------------|---|
| c.....C | Perfect octave | 32 = 2(16) | 2 |
| b | | | |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| a | | | |
| g | | | |
| f | | | |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| e | | | |
| d | | | |

| | | | |
|---|--|------------|---|
| c..... (Fundamental C, generating overtones) | | 16 = 1(16) | 1 |
|---|--|------------|---|

* The fundamental C and its series of overtones form the series of partials.

Ex. 7. The Overtone Series (NMR)

The exact locations at which consonance became dissonance and dissonance became discord were, however, a matter of how accustomed the listener was to various sounds:

It is a notable fact that certain combinations accepted as satisfactory by one listener are found to be unsatisfying to another, and this acceptance or rejection of a given chord depends very largely upon the familiarity of the ear with the chord in question—that is to say, upon the musical experience of the listener. The points in the series, therefore, where consonant chords leave off and dissonance begins, and where dissonance leaves off and discord begins, are not rigidly fixed, as was assumed by most theorists, but depend upon the ear of the particular listener, who is in turn influenced by the musical age in which he lives. It is this fact, proved by the history of musical progress, in conjunction with the fact that, acoustically speaking, there is no point at which any other than an arbitrary difference between them can be shown, which establishes the relativity of consonance, dissonance, and discord. (*NMR*, 10-11)

This “relativity” was a sort of relativism. There was no immovable point at which music became “consonant” or “dissonant,” and therefore all degrees of dissonance could be recognized to be valid or not only in respect to their particular historical periods. Yet, this “relativity” was a far cry from the cultural relativism I will describe more fully in the next chapter. It did not recognize as culturally contingent the concepts of “consonance,” “dissonance,” and “discord,” only the contingency of the location of their boundaries. Cowell understood the concepts themselves and that of the spectrum that organized them (the overtone series) to reflect a scientific, immutable nature to music, and it was upon that very absolute basis that there could be proven with certainty that there were a variety of equally valid ways of making music. Cowell’s “relativity,” with its nod to Einstein’s theory of relativity, was fundamentally positivist in its orientation.

At the time of the publication of *New Musical Resources*, Cowell’s views were also relativistic in the sense that he understood there to be different values guiding musical creation. He explained that his scientific theories were not meant to establish the terms by which musics were to be regarded as valuable. “Values” as Cowell conceived of them lay apart from, or on top of, the more objective basis of music that he considered himself to be discovering scientifically. Cowell referred to values variably as “taste,” “fashion,” or

“convention”: these were aspects of music that were subject to change, being an accident of history.¹²¹

Cowell’s framework for the understanding of music and its valuation consisted then of 1) an aspect of intrinsic features of musical materials that were scientifically/experimentally understandable, and 2) an aspect that was socially conditioned. The former sort of value could be assessed in terms of its accuracy, the latter in terms of its persuasiveness:

It is my conviction...that the finest taste and the perfect use of scientifically co-ordinated materials go together, and that the musical resources outlined add to the possibilities of musical expression and are therefore vital potentialities, rather than merely cold facts. (*NMR*, xxi)

Significantly, according to Cowell’s model these aspects of “taste” and “science,” or historically based versus inherent musical properties, were not aspects of a single diad as they were in the theories of Seeger,¹²² but rather each existed as an independent stratum, with the aspect of taste on top of the more fundamental and independent objective layer. Music could be written that made no use of established conventions and appealed to no contingent values (though Cowell did not hold that this was the single desirable goal).

¹²¹ Prior to writing the introduction to *New Musical Resources*, in a 1925 article titled “The Value of Eclecticism” (*The Sackbut* 5, no. 9 [1925]: 264-265), Cowell preached a relativistic ideal for music listening, stating that the listener must have the capacity to recognize different values in different composers: “The most impossible method of getting anywhere in listening to music, is to try to fit it into the Procrustian bed of a pre-conceived idea of what music should be like” (p. 265).

¹²² See Robert R. Grimes, “Form, Content, and Value: Seeger and Criticism to 1940,” in *Understanding Charles Seeger*, 64-83. Grimes traces the development of Seeger’s theories of value until 1940, the approximate time at which he turned toward a more “ethnomusicological” orientation. In most of his publications until that time, Seeger discussed musical value as an aspect of the whole musical fact, inextricable from that dimension that might be discussed scientifically. Seeger’s orientation was distinctly Marxist: he regarded music as existing in the form that it did in the interests of a particular class. Value could be defined as the way that particular class interests were realized in the music. As noted, Cowell tended to separate the scientific aspect of music from that which was the result of particular values. For Cowell, it might be said, whether a piece of music had value (or no value) in its fundamental aspect (its scientifically examinable aspect) was entirely determined by the development of its elements along lines which were more or less objective. Values, understood as variable, did exist, but did not apply to this fundamental aspect.

Cowell's notion of there being objectively perceivable properties to music reflected his being well versed in contemporary social sciences literature: at the time there was a commonplace understanding that social practices had inherent constitutions that could be objectively observed and analyzed, much like the objects of study in the natural sciences.¹²³

In this vein, Cowell found that the laws of harmony as they were conventionally taught contained "discrepancies." It was not faulty to imagine that harmony used in composition might be guided by natural laws, but current convention in the teaching of harmony was based in part on "underlying science and more inevitable principles" and in part "on the taste of a former era of music" (*NMR*, xviii). There was nothing wrong with composing with such a concoction of fact and fashion, but it would be important to recognize the conventional "laws" of harmony for what they were, mere fashion, and rather outmoded fashion at that, and to be open to "new resources" as supplements to the old.

Old fashions could be regarded as outmoded because there was, according to Cowell, evidence of a natural trajectory of progress in the development of dissonance. He noted, for instance, that modern instruments were capable of producing more overtones than were older ones. Having familiarity with the complex sounds of modern instruments,

¹²³ See R.F. Ellen, ed., *Ethnographic Research: A Guide to General Conduct* (London and Orlando: Academic Press, 1984). Ellen notes that anthropology's conception of its principal method of participant observation had to shift as its conception of the nature of its subject shifted: "The importance ascribed to observation as the main data yielding procedure (in the early 20th century phase of anthropology) derives directly from anthropology's ideas about the constitution of its subject matter which, like the subject matter of natural science, should be directly observable, as well as from its insistence on empirical scholarship characteristic of science. This notion can be traced back to Malinowsky's (1922) requirement of 'the description of the imponderabilia of actual life'." The idea of participant observation would gradually be amended to put more focus on the meaning ascribed to studied practices by the subjects themselves, the social sciences thereby becoming distinct from the natural sciences, whose objects could be studied through direct observation.

modern listeners were naturally more prepared to hear dissonance than were listeners of previous eras. The evolution of tonality had moved, according to Cowell, quite consistently along these lines:

Looking back over the history of music, it must be admitted that we have no means of knowing exactly what was done by the very ancient peoples; there is some evidence, however, to support the theory that in ancient Greece the great choruses sang in unison, using no harmony whatsoever, and that the instruments which accompanied the choruses also simply played the melody with the voices. There are references to the lack of musicality on the part of any singer who sang notes apart from the body of the chorus.

A melody with percussion accompaniment but no harmony is characteristic of nearly all primitive music. (*NMR*, 12)¹²⁴

Cowell's views on evolutionism and their implication for his construction of a concept of "primitive music" will be taken up at length in the next subsection. Here, I wish to point out how Cowell's relativism, positivism, and evolutionism all mutually supported each other. The scientific basis of all tonality in the overtone series (positivism) provided a framework from which to understand the history of musical "progress" (evolutionism) as a shifting of the powers of society to apprehend greater and greater levels of dissonance. The fact that there was this historical shift (evolutionism), and not a fixed point that demarcated the boundaries between "consonance," "dissonance," and "discord," suggested that there were many different ways of distinguishing the three that were equally valid (relativism). The ultimate thrust of all this was not only to scientifically vindicate the intense dissonance of new music as "equally

¹²⁴ Gann ("Subversive Prophet") has argued that there were flaws in Cowell's historical argument: "While he correctly asserts that the major third was originally considered a discord and only later accepted as a concord, he does not take into account that in the Pythagorean tuning of late medieval France the ratio of the major third was defined as 81/64, very high up in the overtone series indeed. Getting the interval reclassified as a consonance with a ratio of 5/4 involved not only hearing differently but overthrowing a system of theory, as well as altering the way organ pipes and stringed instruments were tuned" (p. 178). Gann finds that Cowell's systematized theories of pitch based on the overtone series fall short of their potential because he fails to make an argument for just intonation (just intonation will be discussed further in the next chapter on Harrison).

valid,” but to suggest (though never to state explicitly) that it represented the pinnacle of the harmonic practices of history.

Following these theories on pitch, with which as described Cowell had attempted to subsume all known and possible harmonic materials into a single system based on the overtone series, he presented his theories on rhythm. Cowell put forth a new sort of meter that he developed in direct analogy with the ratios of tone vibrations in the overtone series. He noted that both harmonic intervals and metrical relationships could be expressed with numerical ratios: for instance, the ratio 2:1 might refer to a passage with two parts an octave apart in pitch, or it could refer to a passage with one part moving in whole notes and another part moving in half notes. From there, he noted the poverty of conventionally employed rhythmic resources relative to those of pitch, for while pitches commonly were employed in complex ratios such as 5:4 (“major third”), 6:5 (“minor third”), and conceivably unlimited others, the ratios between rhythmic events tended to be limited to powers of 2, such as 2:1, 4:1, 8:1, and so forth. He suggested that just as the two tones of a major 3rd vibrate at a ratio of 5:4, so might a new sort of meter be created in which rhythmic events occurred in cycles of 5:4. Any ratio might be used, and beyond such rhythmic diads there might further be rhythmic triads, of 5:4:3 for instance, and denser layerings. Further extending the analogy, Cowell observed that, just as harmony tended to shift from measure to measure, so might this “metrical harmony.” He argued that the adoption of such an expanded conception of meter was overdue, and asked the reader to consider, “If in lieu of a melody the same note were to be repeated for an entire work, it would be considered absurd; yet this endless repetition is just what is expected in

metre, in which hundreds of the same metrical units, such as measures of $\frac{3}{4}$, etc., follow one another without change” (*NMR*, 69).



Ex. 8. Examples of Polymeter (*NMR*)

Thus it can be seen that, on the one hand, in *New Musical Resources* Cowell hoped that his inquiry into the nature of musical resources would facilitate their better exploitation for myriad compositional uses, just as a scientist who tested steel would hope to facilitate its greater usefulness for myriad purposes in industry; on the other hand, he hoped his discoveries would validate his own previously developed compositional practices and those of his modernist colleagues. He attempted to procure this validation by relativising the accomplishments of more conventional (hegemonic) Western music (e.g. by “proving” that its harmonic language was not based on immutable laws but on contingent fashions), and through demonstration that the compositional techniques that he and his colleagues had arrived at intuitively turned out to have scientific validity.

“‘Modern’ music,” he assured, “is not proceeding blindly” (*NMR*, xviii). Cowell described, for instance, how through the present study he had discovered the scientific bases of his own earlier work with tone clusters, even though he had developed them intuitively: “namely, by sounding together a number of tones related through the higher reaches of the overtones, in the same spacing in which they occur in the overtone series” (*NMR*, xxi). The implication was that, even if modernism was not the only valuable movement in music, it could be claimed that it was the only one that made scientific validity an aim.¹²⁵ Even with its highly controversial practices, modernism could through Cowell’s study make a sturdy claim to legitimacy.

The theory not only had the ability to vindicate the past, but also to predict the future. For instance, not only could the presence of microtones in works of new music be justified, but it could be predicted which microtones would become the next accepted additions to the common palette: “there is a strong possibility that the next development may be to add to music the next highest overtone after the half-step, our present most complex interval. This would not give the quarter-step, but an interval a little smaller than a half-step” (*NMR*, 19). Since some time had passed between the original development of the theory in 1919 and its publication in 1930, Cowell could at that later date already comment on how the theory’s predictive powers had been proven in the intervening achievements of composers such as Ruggles, Hindemith, and Schönberg: “Such progress

¹²⁵ Cowell described his own role as developer and tester of musical materials for the purpose of their general use in his later article “How Relate Music and Dance?” *Dance Observer* 1, no. 5 (1934): 52. Cowell called for the use of new tones, ones especially appropriate for dance, and reported on his own fall and winter experiments with these new tones. This is one example of how Cowell conceived of himself, within the field of composition, as having the special role of technological innovator.

is encouraging and seems to give further proof that the theory as postulated has validity” (*NMR*, xxiii).

Besides justifying his earlier stylistic practices, Cowell’s theories set forth in *NMR* also provided the basis for some new compositions. His *Quartet Romantic* (an excerpt of which is shown in ex. 9) serves as an example of his own work with polyrhythm.

Cowell’s sort of polyrhythm is found throughout, including the opening with groupings of 6 (flute 1) 5 (flute 2) 4 (violin) and 2 (viola) beats. Later groupings such as $6 \frac{2}{3}$ beats $2 \frac{2}{3}$ beats emerge. His *Quartet Euphometric* is similar, except in its style of notation. In that piece, rather than having continuously shifting groupings but consistent barrings, the barrings and time signatures shift and do not align among parts.

QUARTET ROMANTIC

I

HENRY COWELL

$\text{♩} = 100$

Flute 1

Flute 2

Violin

Viola

The musical score is written for four parts: Flute 1, Flute 2, Violin, and Viola. The time signature is 12/8. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 100$. The score is divided into three systems. The first system shows the beginning of the piece with a tempo marking of quarter note = 100. The second and third systems continue the piece with various musical notations including slurs, ties, and dynamic markings. The score is written for four parts: Flute 1, Flute 2, Violin, and Viola.

Ex. 9. *Quartet Romantic*

Mr. Ch and Chinese Meter

The ideas on rhythm the Cowell expressed in *New Musical Resources* reappeared later in a different form in a 1929 article describing the reaction of a respected Chinese scholar and musician named Mr. Ch who tried to learn about Western music from Cowell: “To my ears, alas, it is devoid of meaning.”¹²⁶ Mr. Ch does not understand harmony. Though he is a good-natured, earnest, and intelligent student, he is nevertheless both unimaginative and ethnocentric. He cannot, even on an earnest attempt, grasp musical values different from his own.

There was no actual Mr. Ch.¹²⁷ Cowell created him as a tool for broadening his readership’s imagination of musical difference. This was a didactic piece, like so many of Cowell’s, intended to spread awareness that different musics had both different forms of development and were motivated by different values (those were not precisely the same issues in his mind), and that members of one culture often lacked the capacity to recognize beauty that was plain to members of another. In the voice of Mr. Ch., Cowell deployed a representation of Chinese musical values in order to likewise represent and simultaneously make relative Western musical values.

Mr. Ch cannot understand why the orchestra needs so many instruments: “what use is one more instrument if you cannot hear the melody it plays?” He asks slyly if they are not merely for “pomp and show.”¹²⁸ Through such remarks, the reader was given an opportunity to recognize with shock and delight how unwieldy, and empty of (melodic)

¹²⁶ “Music of the Hemispheres,” *Modern Music* VI, no. 3 (1929): 12-18.

¹²⁷ This is indicated by Sidney Cowell in script at the bottom of a letter of inquiry about the article from Kuo-Huang Han, April 30, 1970 (Henry Cowell Collection, New York Public Library).

¹²⁸ “Music of the Hemispheres,” 13.

interest their own music would seem to an outsider, and presumably to become aware that there were worlds of musical meaning that they themselves were oblivious to.

The reader was further encouraged to see Western music from a perhaps unfamiliar angle when Mr. Ch. remarks that Bach and Schönberg “are very much alike” (p. 15). The element of harmony, which so utterly differentiates them for the Westerner, is undetectable by Mr. Ch. He finds Schönberg to be a bit more to his liking because it is clearer. Chopin is his favorite because of the rhythmic independence of the lines (cross-rhythms), which reminds him of his native art; and yet Mr. Ch finds Western music to be generally unsatisfying in its lack of “rhythmic development,” and notes that, “were the melodies truly independent, each would have a different metre that would change at separate times” (pp. 15-16).

In so describing the nature of Chinese meter, Mr. Ch articulates the very sort idea of rhythmic development Cowell had put forth in *New Musical Resources*. As seen, Cowell’s ideas for this sort of development did not stem from a study of Chinese music, but were developed logically in analogy with his the use of pitches in intervals. With these words by Mr. Ch, it was as if Cowell had found for—in actuality granted to(!)—his invented sort of meter the support of a native authority, which validated its viability as a musical practice among a people, and indeed the entire theory of a truth “out-there” of which it was a part. He did not here mention that Mr. Ch’s description of Chinese meter was reminiscent of that he had described in *New Musical Resources* and as applied in the two quartets described above.

At the end of the article Cowell made Mr. Ch a mouthpiece for the sort of cultural relativism that I will describe at length in the next chapter as a contrast with the views of

Harrison. In this view, the value and meaning of a particular musical material, such as a portamento, are not given as inhering in the materials themselves. Rather materials derive their meaning from a body of associations that are culturally specific. Mr. Ch explains, “Such slides or portamentos, regarded as out of taste in your music, are fundamental in ours. They appear in our speech, we find them in the sounds of nature, the wind and the sea, and we consider them great assets to our music” (p. 16). In his conclusion to the article, Cowell reflected on the culture’s centrality in the apprehension of value:

For myself I realized that it would be folly to attempt a judgment on Chinese music, our own laws being no guide thereto. But the visit of this fixed academician of the Orient served to provide me with a refreshing if distant glimpse of other planetary orbits of music than our own. (p. 18)

As seen in Cowell’s *New Music Resources*, his conception of culture-based meaning did not necessarily conflict with his positivist views. Cowell saw that there were two sorts of musical values: those which were culturally/historically contingent and those which were inherent to the materials themselves (the latter sort was that respect by which music might be interesting to listeners regardless of their historical/cultural positions). Cowell spoke disparagingly of the contingent sort (using terms such as “fashion”) only in cases when it seemed to him that they had become the basis for ethnocentrism and rigidity.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Cowell further discussed contingent values in an entry on “Oriental” Music in *The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: 1930-35.) He described a consistent concern with producing specific emotional/spritual states in Oriental music (which would distinguish it from the subjectivism of European music). The means of producing these states varied from region to region, but the purpose was always the same. Cowell described Javanese music as esoteric, with each note possessing a particular emotional resonance, and Balinese music as being less formal, more closely tied to Indian origins, more “folk-like,” and as having more rhythmic inventiveness. I am unsure what precisely “less formal” meant, since I have not found the term to appear regularly in Cowell’s writings. It is also unclear to me what about Balinese music made it seem “folk-like” to Cowell, but it is likely that this statement as well as the comment on it’s being more rhythmically inventive tie into Cowell’s evolutionist understanding of culture: Bali would presumably have been more “primitive” than the “cultivated” Java. Though the statement about Balinese music being more closely tied to Indian “origins” might suggest diffusionist thinking, I have not found such

Folk Music, “Primitive” Music, and Nations

As with other composer/ethnographers, such as McPhee and Harrison, Cowell’s ethnographic and theoretical writings served a peculiar double function. They simultaneously represented foreign cultures and gave directions for the compositional field at home. For example, a 1926 trip to Moravia (in the modern Czech Republic) piqued Cowell’s interest in folk music as a basis of a new compositional style,¹³⁰ and in a resulting article (citation) he employed this sort of hybrid rhetoric. Cowell wrote that Moravian music included “many effects we have considered to be of recent invention in ‘modern’ music, many things not to be found in any known music new or old, and above all, a method of procedure of its own.” The functions of this argument were simultaneously descriptive (Moravian music is like *this*), prescriptive (modern music could further develop if it followed it in *this* direction), and polemical (both are similarly free of the worst failings of conventional Western music, those being *this*).

Cowell suggested that Moravian folk musical elements might be taken as a foundation for a new art music. In a 1929 article titled “Hidden Irish Treasure” (*Modern Music*) he similarly argued that

In this age of great harmonic development, it may prove valuable to observe certain little known modes of melodic usage. A special style of unfamiliar conception, not to mention actual tunes, may offer the composer the basis of a new and individual music.¹³¹

thinking to be otherwise much evidenced in Cowell’s writings. Other entries on “Music and Musicology,” “Primitive,” and “Occidental” were written by Charles Seeger, and Helen Roberts.

¹³⁰ See David Paul, “From American Ethnographer to Cold War Icon: Charles Ives through the Eyes of Henry and Sidney Cowell,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 59, no. 2 (summer 2006): 399-458. Paul has argued that Cowell’s description of the possibility for Czech composers to create a new thoroughly original style based on Moravian folk music matched what he later suggested Ives had accomplished with New England folk music.

David Paul has pointed out that here Cowell was arguing that folk materials (“resources”) be transported across borders, and not that they be developed strictly along national lines (as is associated with the nationalist ideals of Dvorak). I would add that this was in part because Cowell maintained a conception of music as technology, the development of which ought not to be limited to national borders as a style might. Here Cowell was not arguing per se that modernist composers should draw from Irish music so as to conjure an Irish atmosphere in their works, or in any other way to make explicit reference to Irish culture (Cowell did do so himself in a number of his early piano pieces). Rather, his interest was more in trans-cultural technological development. Western composers, steeped as they were in harmonic technologies, might find it refreshing to draw from the melodic technologies of Irish music.

In 1929 Cowell gave a concert in Cuba, and in 1931 published an article on the Cuban *son*, which alluded to his concept of “the primitive” and also made reference to his conception of musical resources as various, with different societies possessing different resources, all of which were open to be “tapped” by composers internationally. Cowell was interested particularly in *sones* among Cuban song styles, finding many others to be “saturated with the most commonplace type of Spanish song,” and even showing “some alarmingly poor Italian opera influence.”¹³² Nothing about those songs was really Cuban “except the words and some minute distinctions of rhythm.” Yet, in the *son* he found a music played by Black performers with “a whole set of unique native instruments,” which were used in greater numbers than “is usual in purely primitive music.” “The

¹³¹ Cowell, “Hidden Irish Treasure,” *Modern Music* 6, no. 4 (May-June 1929): 31.

¹³² “The ‘Sones’ of Cuba,” *Modern Music* 8, no. 2 (1931): 45-47.

rhythms are indigenous and although the melodies and harmonic outlines are not so unique, the whole effect of these songs is of a tonal texture utterly distinctive.” His singular assessment: “Cuban music is really folksong with a barbaric accompaniment.” Cowell did not define the term “barbaric,” but it would have been understood as equivalent to “primitive.”¹³³

Cowell also described two Cuban composers “of originality,” Alejandro Caturla and Amadeo Roldan. Though he had positive things to say about each, he found that neither had

*tapped all the remarkable resources which the folk-music of their country suggests. These could be utilized to build up a full-blooded, tropical style, gigantic but unsentimental; diversified, and with less ostinato than is used by Roldan and Caturla. Perhaps some other as yet unknown composer will come forward and achieve the wide sweep and glory of rhythm presaged by these Sones.*¹³⁴ (my italics)

Cowell’s nearly exclusive interest in that which was original (from his perspective) in the *son* is indicative of both the relativist and positivist aspects of his thinking. As a relativist, Cowell was seeking to discover new dimensions of difference that might disrupt ethnocentrism and counter the hegemonic values of traditional Western art music, spreading tolerance and opening the creative terrain for modernist composers. As a positivist, Cowell was seeking to discover original musical materials as resources that might be added to the totality of scientific knowledge of music’s potentials. Caturla and

¹³³ In the influential evolutionist theories of Lewis Henry Morgan, as set forth in his *Ancient Society: Or, researches in the lines of human progress from savagery through barbarism to civilization* (New York: Henry Holt, 1878), all human societies were situated within one of the three evolutionary stages of “savagery,” “barbarism,” and “civilization.” “Savagery” was the most primitive of human stages, and the “barbarism” that followed it was characterized, in part, by the technological development of smelting iron. There were, according to Morgan, no living “savage” tribes. The postulation of their existence was arrived at through deductive means: Morgan extrapolated from the evidence he possessed of living cultures that they must have been preceded by some even more primitive culture. See Martin, “Evolutionizing Difference II: Lewis Henry Morgan and *Ancient Society*,” chap. 2 in *The Languages*.

¹³⁴ “The ‘Sones’,” 47,

Roldan had “tapped” those resources, though not to his full satisfaction.¹³⁵ It is interesting that, besides employing a battery of descriptors typical of publications in *Modern Music* during this era such as “full-blooded,” “gigantic,” and “unsentimental,” (an image of enormous power in the synergy of the “modern” and the “primitive,” both dark and utopian) Cowell identified the full potential of those resources as manifesting in a “tropical” modernism (neither a specifically Cuban modernism nor an international modernism). Cowell would not have objected to trans-national tapings of *son*. He was not interested in exclusively nationalist forms of musical development. Meanwhile, more recent concerns about the ethics of appropriating musical materials from other cultures probably did not occur to him.

In 1933 Cowell edited a collection of essays titled *American Composers on American Music*,¹³⁶ his rationale for which sheds light on his views on nationalism, particularly American nationalism, at the time. In his introduction he divided the composers currently working in America into eight groups, and these included those who had moved to the U.S. from Europe (such as Edgard Varèse from France and Nicolas Slonimsky from Russia) and those who drew their primary influences from various European traditions (such as Adolph Weiss and Wallingford Riegger, who drew from the German, and Henry Eicheim and Virgil Thomson, who drew from the French). Only relatively few of the composers Cowell mentioned were native-born Americans who developed “indigenous materials” (and by indigenous materials Cowell did not seem to mean specifically “folk”

¹³⁵ On Caturla and Rodlán and the subject of Cuban nationalism, see Robin Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997).

¹³⁶ Henry Cowell, ed, *American Composers on American Music*, (Stanford University Press, 1933).

materials, but quite broadly anything, including the most experimental, dissonant techniques, that had not been imported from Europe).

All of these classifications aimed to account for the very international, especially European, nature of American composition. How then might it be meaningful to assemble all of these figures under the banner of “American” music? Cowell’s answer was that it was only meaningful as far as it won America its “independence,” freedom from the compulsion to imitate:

Nationalism in music has no purpose as an aim in itself. Music happily transcends political and racial boundaries and is good and bad irrespective of the nation in which it was composed. Independence, however, is stronger than imitation. In the hands of great men independence may result in products of permanent value. Imitation cannot be expected to produce such significant achievements. (p. 13)

Cowell felt that, once independence had truly been achieved in all nations, “self-conscious nationalism will no longer be necessary” (p. 13). A nationalist ideal of the development of a distinctive national style by drawing upon the nation’s folk materials did not seem to appeal to him at this time.¹³⁷ His reference to “permanent value” can be seen as reflective of his concept of a form a value, perhaps the most important sense of value at this point in his career, which transcended historical limits, and was valuable by virtue of its successful exploitation of musical elements and development of resources. Such value ultimately transcended national boundaries, but could only be hoped to be

¹³⁷ Hicks, however, describes a nationalistic tone in Cowell’s journal articles in the 1920s: “Despite the variety of intended audiences and editorial requirements of these journals, Cowell’s prose always maintained the celebratory, sometimes hyperbolic tone of a press release for American music.... In such articles Cowell almost never writes about the *musicality* of the composers or the quality of their compositions per se, except in an occasional generality, such as applauding the ‘never-ending sparkling flow’ in Chavez’s music. But he does consistently gauge a composer’s worth by the logic or sheer newness of his methods. The composers that he championed, Cowell said, ‘are together forming a gigantic American musical culture,’ which by virtue of its diversity ‘is becoming one of the most interesting the world has known’” (*HCB*, 120). Cowell’s interest in emphasizing newness and logic over quality and musicality may reflect his understanding of the former qualities as being definable in an absolute sense, while he understood the latter as “conventions,” definable only in historical context.

realized within a context of creative independence from limiting foreign models. (In 1932 Cowell wrote, “Public favor comes to those great enough to be independent. Ives is independent and truly great.”¹³⁸)

Neo-Primitivism and the Proletariat

That indigenous materials were at this time not interesting to Cowell so much as the raw materials of distinctive national idioms, but as the raw materials for trans-national movements, can be seen articulated in his 1933 article “Towards Neo-Primitivism.”¹³⁹ “Everyone interested in modern music,” he stated, was aware that “primitives” and modernists had a lot in common. Cowell elaborated on what the similarities between “primitives” and modernists there already were, and, significantly, pointed out that there were few commonalities between “primitives” and high-profile modernist composers. “Primitive” music was simple, while these modernists strove for ever greater complexity. Only in its increasing rhythmic complexity did their music approximate that of the “primitive.” Cowell did not make explicit why “primitive” music, if it was so simple, should inspire progressive composers to become primitivists.

There is at least a clue in Cowell’s reference to the releasing of “primordial elements.” The counter movement he proposed would be “full blooded and vital.” It would draw upon “primary music elements,” without resorting to a “supercilious formalism of a return to the particular style of some past century” (read: neoclassicism). It would also be based upon all the world’s musics, and therefore it would have a certain

¹³⁸ “American Composers IX: Charles Ives,” *Modern Music* 10, no. 1 (November-December 1932): 32.

¹³⁹ “Towards Neo-Primitivism,” *Modern Music* 10 (March-April 1933): 149-53.

“truth” grounded in universality (as opposed to an ethnocentric claim to truth) that early-century modernists greatly wished to claim for their projects. In his usual style, Cowell retroactively declared certain new musical practices as primitivist ones, including the use of harmony in percussive ways and the use of tone clusters (his own). But he also cautioned against the casual conception of primitive music as “something wild, confused, with raucous cries and noisy instruments all bound together by powerful rhythm.” He remarked that since, as it so happened, this was also the casual conception of modernist music, it was not surprising that the popular imagination had formed a superficial link between the two. But really, “the primitive is often soft, melodious and soothing—and modern music is, after all, a highly organized, involved and sophisticated art.”¹⁴⁰

Cowell took advantage of a popular image of the physicality and primalness of certain non-Western practices, and, pointing to the difference between such practices and those of high-brow Western Europeans, he painted the latter as contrastingly deflated and effete, overly artful, and lacking in physicality. In this he singled out the supposed primitivist Stravinsky, whose influence from the “primitive” he called “comparatively slight and highly sublimated.” He also rejected both the general “over-complexity of the earlier modern music” and the “sentimentality and pomp of later romantic music” in favor of, respectively, the simpler values of “experiment” and “feeling” that would characterize his primitivism. And, as noted, he rejected neoclassicism’s “supercilious formalism” but not the use of “primary musical elements,” by which he referred to a singable melody with little harmonic support and simple percussive accompaniment. Cowell also identified as “primitive” the use of sliding tones, of percussive chords (rather than chords “exploited” in a “harmonic connection”), and of tone clusters.

¹⁴⁰ “Towards Neo-Primitivism,” 149-150.

Such rhetoric linking the progressive American composers and “primitives” and dichotomizing the two from the Western Europeans (which Cowell here associated with the fad of neoclassicism, implying that it epitomized the failings of the bourgeoisie) effected an ironic (though, as I discuss in the Chapter on McPhee, fully standard within Cowell’s milieu) jumbling of more commonplace dichotomizations of civilized EuroAmerican culture and the culture of savages, of masculine and feminine (the most “civilized” European composers now became effete), and of high and low, all of which were twists upon more dominant demarcations of Western and non-Western.

Cowell published these statements on neo-primitivism in *Modern Music*, in which dichotomizations of Europe and America were pervasive (as discussed in the Chapter on McPhee); as such in noting that Western Europeans did not make good primitivists he was claiming primitivism as a national movement for America by default. He did not, however, regard it as exclusively an American endeavor. Soviets too had developed primitivist music of interest. It was, in fact, music composed for proletarian choruses that Cowell found to have the most authentic claim to affinity with “primitive” music. Cowell’s list of the most primitivist composers included Eastern Europeans, Americans, and Hans Eisler of Germany, the only Western European.

Cowell was at this time involved with the New York Composers Collective, a group with unofficial links to the Communist Party that was dedicated to the production of mass songs.¹⁴¹ In the same year that he wrote “Towards Neo-Primitivism” he and Seeger

¹⁴¹ On the Composers’ Collective see for instance Barbara Zuck, *A History of Musical Americanism* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1980), and Carol Oja, “Composer with a Conscience: Elie Siegmeister in Profile,” *American Music* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 158-80, and “Marc Blitzstein’s ‘The Cradle Will Rock’ and Mass-Song Style of the 1930s,” *The Musical Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (1989): 445-475, and Catherine Parsons Smith, “‘Harlem Renaissance Man’ Revisited: The Politics of Race and Class in William Grant Still’s Late Career,” *American Music* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 381-406, and David King

offered a seminar for the Collective titled “Historical and Theoretical Factors in the Composing of Workers’ Songs,” from which was produced the *Workers Song Book 1*. Herein lies another key to understanding the appeal of primitivism to Cowell. The Collective was facing philosophical challenges; for Seeger, the frustration of trying to create an appropriately proletarian music led to a reevaluation of his views on musical value, and was the beginning of his interest in folk song. Seeger’s dilemma was that what he saw as radical music—involving the systematic inversion of conventions, such as those of consonance and dissonance, exclusively considered within the context of “‘Good Music’, capital G, capital M,”¹⁴²—proved distasteful to the masses and useless in communal music-making. His political and musical progressivism, which until that point he had understood as one, became incompatible.

For Cowell there was no such dilemma.¹⁴³ He had already shed the notion that the most progressive music was the one that systematically overturned all convention: he had come to see conventions as plural, and in his conception the most salient sort of progress would be the widening of tolerance for the conventions of others. Therefore what was

Dunaway, “Unsung Songs of Protest: The Composers Collective of New York,” *New York Folklore* 5, nos. 1-2 (1979): 1-19, and “Charles Seeger and Carl Sands: The Composers’ Collective Years,” *Ethnomusicology* 24, no. 2 (1980): 159-168.

¹⁴² Seeger, interview by David K. Dunaway, in “Charles Seeger and Carl Sands: The Composers’ Collective Years,” *Ethnomusicology* 24, no. 2 (1980): 162. Seeger described his problematic conception of revolutionary music: “Music doesn’t take any cognizance of the dichotomy between what is revolutionary and what is not revolutionary. To change musical technique is not revolutionary, outside of music. I considered myself a musical revolutionist simply by reversing old technical devices, such as the preparation of consonance. Instead of preparing a dissonance and resolving a dissonance, I turned it upside down, and I prepared a consonance. My first species of counterpoint was all dissonance. Well, that was musically revolutionary, but it had no significance socially. And it wasn’t revolutionary musically; it was simply a change, a stunt I could do” (p. 167).

¹⁴³ The members of the Collective had various strategies for creating an appropriately proletarian music. Seeger recalled in his 1976 interview with Dunaway that the other members of the collective had no knowledge of and no interest in anything other than concert music. This was not true of Cowell. Also Marc Blitzstein was becoming interested in jazz and popular song during his years in the Collective.

progressive could be the unconventional implementation of the conventions of others. Primitivism offered a solution whereby music could be both fully progressive and because of its simple nature and peculiar conventionalism ideally suited for use by the proletariat. Though Cowell did not explicitly say so, it is likely that in envisioning an evolutionary logic by which particular forms of social organization and particular musical styles could be seen to consistently correspond throughout history he would have regarded the exclusive use of “primitive” musical elements as effecting a return to pre-capitalist social formations. What Cowell would have really wanted musically and socially was not a return, but a forward progression that drew wisdom from “the primitive.”

Cowell cautioned that “primitives” should not be “lumped into one group.” This statement may appear odd in the context of his larger argument that there may be a “primitive” basis of new music; as such it would indeed follow that there is such a thing as a “primitive” type of music. He was not being contradictory. By Cowell’s understanding of culture, he could caution that there was great variety to “primitives and their tribes” while still maintaining that they formed a cohesive category set apart from the also varied yet cohesive “cultivated” peoples and their “nations.” Though there was certainly variation among “primitive” musics, there were also many commonalities:

Most of it is sung to the accompaniment of percussion; melody and rhythm are thus the main elements. Where several different voices sing together they are either in unison or heterophonic, making a free polyphony in which each part is quite independent except that it must come out with the others in the end. Further, nearly all primitive music has rapid rhythmical changes, syncopations, polyrhythms and cross-rhythms. In the melody there may be a wide range of different sorts of pitch curves as well as straight lines of sound. The tones either wobble back and forth or slide up or down—not carelessly, but as a vital part of the musical scheme.¹⁴⁴

“Primitives” were people who shared a particular stage of cultural evolution, and it was therefore inevitable that they would share many practices, such as music and social organization.

“Primitives,” Dance, and Percussion

In 1934 Cowell published an article titled “How Relate Music and Dance?” that further explained the nature of “primitive” music. In all cases “primitives” used dance and percussive music together.

Irrespective of geographical location, almost every primitive tribe in the world performs ceremonials which utilize dance and sound together.... The sound is, of course, not “interpreted” by the dancers. Yet it would seem that the sound is the first step toward inducing the proper rhythmical urge which finally bursts into bodily expression. For in all ceremonials the drums begin beating first. The dancers begin after the atmosphere has been surcharged with rhythmical impulse by the drums, and often also after singing has begun. In the most primitive places the dancers apparently burst into movement as the surrounding waves of rhythm beat in on them irresistibly.¹⁴⁵

And, differentiable from these “most primitive” dances—in which the percussion would swell, eventually taking hold of the body of the dancer from within and unleashing its sensuous energy in an unplanned and unpredictable explosion of movement—there were also dances of “higher primitive civilization,” in which there was some level of planning, the dance beginning after a set number of beats. Among “primitives” there was further variety in all this interaction of percussion and movement: in some cases non-dancing members of the tribe would sing; in other cases the dancers themselves would sing, or would play percussion instruments, or (in the South Seas) even perform the entire

¹⁴⁴ “Towards Neo-Primitivism,” 152.

¹⁴⁵ “How Relate,” 52.

role of the percussion through clapping. But in all cases there was dancing and percussion, and in all cases the percussion began and the dancing followed. “Primitive” societies shared these features that separated them from “cultivated” societies. In “Primitive” music and dance it was also inevitable that the role of conductor would be held by the principal percussionist, who would lead by giving all players and dancers the beat. This practice “still holds in the cultivated music of the Orient”: “The wood-block and gong player conducts the movement of a Chinese orchestra in operatic performances today.” Furthermore, “The same type of beats are still preserved by our symphonic conductors, and the Chinese orchestra is where they originated” (p. 52).

It is unclear in what sense Cowell spoke of these practices “still” holding in Chinese and Western music: did he mean that there was direct cultural influence from one civilization to another, or did he in fact mean that these commonalities were reflective not of a history of cultural contact but of various societies’ retention of practices of more primitive phases along civilization’s (singular) inevitable line of development (the very latest phase of which being the very modernists of Cowell’s affiliation)? Furthermore, it is unclear on what Cowell based his descriptions of “primitive” music and dance, since he made only vague references to “higher” and “lower” primitives, not to the particularities of any geographically located people. It is likely that his ideas about “primitives” were at least in part developed by logical extrapolation into a totalizing system, in which “lower primitives” represented the far extreme of a continuum. If the “lower primitive’s” dancing was unplanned and physically inspired by rhythm, it was only so because the most cultivated tradition (that of Cowell’s own milieu) so strongly stressed planning and rationality. If to the 21st-century reader this seems to be an

illegitimate method of developing representations of others, it should be noted that the social sciences in Cowell's time were replete with similar theories about "primitives," many of which were very high profile.

These observations were intended to settle questions about the relationship of music and dance in contemporary American choreography, specifically whether dance should be choreographed so as to "interpret" the music. Cowell noted that recent choreography practice was to sever the dance completely from the music, leaving them more-or-less unrelated, so as to avoid having the dance "interpret" the music and become a mere servant to it. Cowell's response was that, in examination of primitive practices, it was clear that there might be a kinetic connection between dance and music whereby the music would inspire the body of the dancer into motion. The "primitive" dance was not in such cases "interpreting" the music, because in actuality there were no correspondences between the semantic content of the music and dance, nor were there any correspondences between the formal plan of the music and dance.

I see no reason why a dancer should be afraid that he or she will be accused of being "interpretive" (this now being in great disrepute) if he bases the dance on some definite rhythmical flow, and this flow is given forth through the sound of instruments, or other sonal means. If he does so he is in step with the practice of primitives whose art of the dance is the most strongly ingrained of any which exists in the world.¹⁴⁶

Cowell spoke of "primitive" dance being "strongly ingrained" as if this had been empirically observed. Whatever the extent of his experience observing all those dances that he characterized as "primitive" and determining their physiological "ingrainment" in each "primitive" person, the categorization of a culture as "primitive" meant that any of its practices could be taken, *a priori* and whatever their actual features, as humanly

¹⁴⁶ "How Relate," 52.

authentic and as non-reflected, or “ingrained.” It was because of this that “primitives” offered the surest illustration of “how relate music and dance.” More specifically, the “primitive” might offer a guide to modern dance because “primitive” art was—by its very essence and *a priori* as “primitive”—non-referential and unplanned. The way that Cowell here constructed and invoked the “primitive” in order to influence contemporary aesthetics with a special form of authority was closely paralleled with McPhee’s statements about Balinese music being “absolute,” published in *Modern Music* the following year.

In invoking the authority of “the primitive” to direct the development of modern music and dance, Cowell was not advocating a full return to “the primitive” *per se*. He in fact complained about recent projects that used only percussion with dance (in itself a “fundamental and normal relationship”), saying that they had “simply gone back to the primitive, adding little or nothing to the connection between the dancer and the beats, usually less rather than more interest and varied than among primitive peoples.”¹⁴⁷ Cowell rather advocated rediscovering the “primitive” bases of music and dance so as to move forward from there. The task of the composer and the dancer was still to embrace experiment and development. In the 1940 article “Drums Along the Pacific” he would offer further clues as to what the proper relationship between the “primitive” and innovative aspects of composition ought to be. When writing music for percussion, he cautioned that there was not only a danger of becoming too “primitive,” but also becoming blindly innovative and disconnected from the essential bases of percussive music in practice:

¹⁴⁷ “How Relate,” 52.

Percussion music is not all alike, nor is it all related to one school of music. The approach of the Italian futurists was in essence artificial, the basic idea being to create, ready-made and without gradual development, or experience with the instruments, a highly complex and sophisticated art-form. Varèse's music was the culmination of this tendency.¹⁴⁸

According to Cowell there were two current groups of composers who were combining the “primitive” and innovative aspects of successful composition in the percussion medium. First, there were the Cuban composers, who “create from direct experience; they are in close contact with the native Afro-Cuban music which is largely based on enticing primitive percussion rhythms.” He had already discussed this group in his 1931 article on *son*. Second, there was a new group: “Our newest Pacific coast group—Cage, Green, Harrison, and Strang—have also developed their interest naturally, as composers for the modern concert dance” (p. 48). “Natural” involvement with percussion thus meant either being in contact with percussion’s roots in a living “primitive” culture, or writing music for dance, which was percussion’s natural role to accompany (or, more precisely, to induce).

“The Nature of Melody”

Cowell’s second treatise, which he finished in late 1937 while in prison,¹⁴⁹ continued the experimentalist theories and methods of *New Music Resources*. This new work, *The Nature of Melody*, was an exploration of potentials of the “melodic element” of music via

¹⁴⁸ “Drums Along the Pacific,” *Modern Music* 18, no. 1 (November-December 1940): 48.

¹⁴⁹ Cowell served four years in prison after being convicted of having sex with a 17-year-old male. See Michael Hicks, “The Imprisonment of Henry Cowell,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 44, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 92-119. Also on the accusation, proceedings, and imprisonment and on the effects of all these on Cowell’s career, see *HCB*, 134-144.

logical processes. It was Cowell's stated goal to break apart the so-called "musical fundamentals" (he applied his own quotation marks to this term) as conventionally taught, and to build in their place a new music theory which would make the most basic features of music—objectively observable and logically accessible—its bases: "Learning to read the notes is essential to be sure; but what about learning something of the nature of the notes which are to be read?" (NOM, I: 9). To this end Cowell recommended, for instance, that a system of neums be reinstated for instruction on melody, the most basic three of which would designate upward motion, downward motion, and non-motion. From this very simple starting point, Cowell suggested that an entire system could be elaborated with which to understand all "melody," an "element" that he implied as immanent to all music and transcendent of culture.¹⁵⁰

In a manner similar to that of *New Music Resources* this treatise was not only a proposal for a systematic and integrated approach to the study of all music, but was at the same time, through evolutionist assumptions, a proposal for a systematic and integrated study of the history of music, encompassing all times and with living non-Western cultures corresponding to historical periods of Western music. This was not laid out as the central purpose of the book. Rather Cowell made occasional references to the music of various historical periods and non-Western cultures as illustrations of his logically built arguments. These attributions were generally to vague traditions (e.g. "primitive," "Oriental," "Christian") and mostly appeared without evidence. Cowell would not have

¹⁵⁰ Cowell's discussion of units of melody focused more upon motives than neums. Gann has called Cowell's treatment of the subject "a disappointment," in part because "Cowell appears to assume motivic development is the only proper method for building up a melody, a strangely Eurocentric view for a pioneering ethnomusicologist. (This idea, first appearing in Cowell's writing at this point, becomes a strange *idée fixe*, marring his future analyses of Ives and other composers.)" See Gann, "Subversive Prophet," 205.

understood his speaking of “primitives” in generalized terms as sloppy. By his understanding, that which he observed “is true of primitive tribes of the same degree of development irrespective of what part of the Globe they are from” (*NOM*, II: 2). For instance, Cowell stated authoritatively that “primitive” song and speech were more-or-less indistinguishable, and that with increasing “cultivation” came increasing distinction between the two modes of vocal production:

[Among primitives] many sounds are used in speech which have no other purpose than to express feelings in terms of sound; such sounds may not have any meaning as words. Some such sounds are still left in our own speech, but they are comparatively rare. The primitives make very frequent use of them. On the other hand, saying the same words over again on different pitches, or repeating them rhythmically or in sequence are devices often used by primitives to indicate a certain meaning; while among more cultivated peoples, this is almost never a part of speech. The primitive man will often break from speech into song, and back again unaware that he has entered two different fields. The stronger the feeling concerning what he is relating, the greater his tendency to marshal the forces of rhythm and changing pitch to aid him in expression. Remnants of this may be observed in the preaching in “revival” meetings. (*NOM*, II: 1-2)

Cowell’s other statements about “primitives” included that the concept of scale was foreign to them: a “primitive melody” was simply a successions of intervals without reference to an abstracted “scale.” In another case, seemingly in contradiction, Cowell described one “primitive scale” as containing the octave and the fifth, plus two more tones precisely in between each of those intervals (yielding C, E-half-flat, G, and B-half-flat). Such contradictions may have been the result of Cowell’s various ideas about “primitives” having been developed in isolation, each as part of a separate logical problem, in which “the primitive” was constructed to represent the far end of a continuum of practices. It is difficult to assess Cowell’s methods of inquiry, because, as stated, most of this authoritatively spoken knowledge about “primitives” was offered without citation to other authors and without direct reference to any particular “primitive”

person or people. It should be mentioned that, as Cowell was in jail at the time that he wrote this book, he might not have had access to the materials that informed his study, and therefore would have been forced into stating his arguments in vague, generalized language. Nevertheless, the style of this treatise is not dissimilar to that of his other publications.

Cowell here maintained his views on the separability of conventional and inherent aspects of music, which he had previously discussed in the 1930 introduction to *New Music Resources*. Yet, in this later treatise he placed new emphasis on the conventional aspect, encouraging composition students to be aware that much of music's interest, specifically its capacity to convey meaning, came through play with convention (in this respect music could be differentiated from language, which was entirely dependent on the conventionality of sounds). "The Student should become able, as far as possible, to decide what values in music are inherent in its own materials, and which are of value because they are established conventions" (NOM, III: 1). Compositions could be written without convention but the student should be advised of the effect of music without standard meaning upon the listener. "Part of the appeal and value of music then, lies in inherent factors, which remain the same in all music, and another part is concerned with the language of a certain musical procedure, which differs in each musical system, and to a more limited extent in styles within a single systems (*sic*)" (NOM, III: 1). Music with inherent interest could be directed at any audience, whereas music of convention could only be of interest to a particular audience, and the composer would have to be quite careful in considering the likely auditory background of his listener. Cowell did not see

the listener as bringing his/her auditory history to bear upon the entire musical experience, only on this particular dimension of it designated as “convention.”

In one application of this argument, Cowell stated that the human body was predisposed to respond to conjunct melodies. Psychologists had discovered that as people listened to a melody they would flex and unflex their vocal chords as if singing it. If the melody became very disjunct, most listeners would no longer be able to follow it and would stop flexing their vocal chords. The point was that, for a melody to have wide appeal, the composer would have to be prepared to write conjunctly, or else only to present his/her work to a “cultivated” audience. While Cowell was by no means rejecting experimental, challenging compositional styles, conventionalism was becoming important to him by its very nature as convention (a relativist notion), as well as by its capacity to indicate which sorts of music were most immutably human (NOM, II: 3-4).

Note that “cultivated” was the word that Cowell uses in antithesis to “primitive.” His understanding of the shifting tastes and conventions of music was to some extent integrated with his evolutionist views. In other words, tastes were variable among different groups, but these shifts to some extent occurred along predictable and inevitable lines of historical development. Rules then ought to be contingent to conventions, which were appropriate to one’s particular phase of historical development. Rules of a past age were not bad in and of themselves, but blind devotion to the rules of another age was inappropriate. Some rules, still maintained in conventional harmony, simply harkened back to particularities of historical change, and had no meaning at all in the present day. Along these lines, Cowell argued that though there had once been significance to the injunction against the use of parallel fifths, there was no longer any sense to it:

This [rule] originated at a time in early medieval Europe when music was just emerging from a period in which consecutive fifths were required at all times, until everyone became bored and disgusted with them (in *organum*). So the rule required that they should not be consecutive—meaning at first, probably, that something should be inserted between them, it being expected that every other interval would be a fifth. This rule has been retained, although no one would be bored by consecutive fifths now, since the period in which they were so much used is happily past. Every leading composer has shown how consecutive fifths may be used to the greatest musical advantage. Science shows that through the second overtone, which can plainly be heard, consecutive fifths are obtained with every tonal succession; if there is anything wrong with them all music would have to be eliminated, since they occur, willy-nilly! (NOM, I: 12)

Much of *The Nature of Melody* reads as an argument with the conventional instruction of music theory and composition, which Cowell again and again accused of ignorance, rigidity, lack of imagination, and absolutism. In this way, the treatise not only set out to represent the “nature” of melody as a universal phenomenon, but also stood as a representation of the state of contemporary music instruction in the West (Cowell painted the dimmest picture if it). He pleaded with educators to acknowledge that there was a great deal of variability to “good” and “bad” in terms of melody, and that their absolutist assessments of quality were rarely made with sufficient knowledge of the whole melodic field. Conventionally, harmony was really the only element of music that was studied at all, and its science was faulty:

There are two main reasons why the study of harmony is generally unsatisfactory. One is that the study has not been made into a scientific and reasonable exposition of the subject of harmony. It is a leftover from the time when the aim was not to know facts about harmony, but to know the conventions of “good taste” as recommended by famous and skilled musicians.

The second reason is that harmony is only one of several musical elements. Even a very excellent knowledge of harmony would be sure to leave a great deal about the other important elements in doubt. Harmony is a less fundamental element than rhythm and melody. Rhythm and melody were employed for no one knows how many years—thousands, certainly—before anything that could be called harmony became a part of musical art; and even today, all the music of the world employs melody and rhythm, whereas harmony as an art is used only in the

music of the European system, or music which has been adapted to the principles of that system. (NOM, I: 7-8)

Harmony was, in fact, not a particularly fundamental musical element, but was a “somewhat complex flowering of an already highly developed musical growth.” That latter growth was melody, and it would therefore be necessary, prior to any but a superficial study of harmony, to develop a scientific study of melody. Such a study was of course what Cowell’s treatise represented. He proceeded with the understanding that there was a single, if highly complex, melodic field the world over, which it was his aim in the book to map. The intention of this mapping was to challenge what he saw as small-mindedness of the common Western musical mind with the presentation of a much broader and ultimately more logically compelling conception of the element of melody as a world phenomenon.

What I most wish to stress is that Cowell’s challenge to limitedness and absolutism was built upon a style of inquiry that was ultimately positivist, even if in its mood it was reminiscent of cultural relativist critiques. The world of melody was much bigger than the small-minded conception of it that he argued with, but it was possible to at least move toward a full accounting of it as it “really was.” The limited capacity of a listener to accept musics that were unfamiliar to him was to a great extent a failure to recognize the “inherent values” of that music that would be evident to a listener who was already familiar with it. Cultural differences were to be understood as differences of experience within and differences of perspective upon a musical field which was ultimately unitary, and which, to a scientist like Cowell, could theoretically be known objectively and in its entirety. And, as stated, Cowell’s approach to knowing this field was as much a matter of logical deduction as it was of empirical discovery.

It should be noted that, while one of Cowell's purposes in writing *The Nature of Melody* was to contradict the naïve idea that the Western major and minor were the only two scales, and to introduce the possibility of new vistas of scales that would represent the dissolution of certain false absolutes, the book's systematic and deductive methods necessitated the employ of a concept of scale with its own absolutes, purportedly meaningful to all melodic practices of the world. It was only with these presupposed bases of a universal concept of scale that Cowell could state, "It is the aim here...to indicate what fields in scale construction have been neglected in our music" (*NOM*, III: 54). The implication was that there was a single worldwide field of scale production, and that all scales, with their various forms of development, exhibited the same fundamental scalar properties.

Joseph Yasser

Nancy Yunhua Rao has demonstrated that this treatise was the child of Cowell's affiliation with the New York Musicological Society, the members of which included Charles Seeger, Nicolas Slonimsky (a guest member), Joseph Schillinger, and Joseph Yasser. Infamously, the members did not include Ruth Crawford, on whom because she was a woman the doors of the inaugural meeting had literally been shut (she was later allowed to attend as a "guest"). As Rao shows, there was a great deal of overlap in the members' (and "guests'") concerns, with two general tendencies of the group significant to Cowell's book: systemization and exoticism. Like Cowell, Yasser, Schillinger, and Slonimsky also developed theories of scale by methods that were, on the one hand, logical and systematic—Slonimsky's relentless method yielded 1,330 scale patterns(!)—

and, on the other hand, inductive in their development of theory based on study of non-Western musics (or at least in the correlation of knowledge, arrived at deductively, with a variety of documented musical practices). These projects also tended to be radical in their critique of conventional Western music theory, for instance of the concept of a scale that falls within the octave limit and is reproducible at the octave level.¹⁵¹

Joseph Yasser (1893-1981) had emigrated from Russia in 1923, and was one of the founding members of the New York Musicological Society.¹⁵² His work can be taken as a key to the problems inherent in the method they shared of developing knowledge of

¹⁵¹ While Nancy Yunhua Rao ("American Compositional Theory in the 1930s: Scale and Exoticism in 'The Nature of Melody' by Henry Cowell," *The Musical Quarterly* 85, no. 4 [Summer 2001]: 595-640) has persuasively argued for the interconnectedness of the views of the members of the New York Musicological Society, she sees a qualitative difference between Cowell's and the others' interests in non-Western musics. She finds that whereas Seeger and Yasser were interested in non-Western musics as "others"—of value, in one way or another, because of their differentiability from Western music—Cowell viewed non-Western musics as part of a broadly defined American tapestry. She notes that Seeger's interest in the other was as a foil for the hegemony for Western culture (as traditions more cultivated in terms of taste), and that Yasser's interest was in fitting musical others into evolutionist schemes. In contrast, she finds that Cowell's "reference to the Orient is of a piece with his desire to create a distinctively American (modernist) voice, precisely because the Orient is part of America" (626). Furthermore, "much of what would be termed an 'Eastern' or 'oriental' sound was native to Cowell's musical imagination" (625-26). Rao quotes Cowell:

"As a child I grew up in San Francisco, living near the Chinese and Japanese districts. Among other music which I heard and sang was included many Chinese and Japanese tunes from my playmates, and I was taken to hear a Chinese opera before I heard a European one, although I went at this time to hear concerts of string quartets, etc. As a result, Oriental music has never seemed strange to me, and I have often in composing thought quite naturally of themes in Oriental modes, or in which Oriental and Occidental elements are integrated. Later I studied the music of North India with a Bengali musician, and the music of Java with a Javanese" (Henry Cowell, "Influence of Oriental Music on American Composers," unpublished manuscript quoted in Rao, "American Compositional" 625).

(To this quote Timothy Taylor has responded: "Cowell's strategy, however, is a familiar one. People who have appropriated, quoted, borrowed music from other cultures frequently employ discourses of long-time knowledge of that music as a way of inoculating themselves against charges of appropriation" [*Beyond Exoticism*, 237].) Though I agree with Rao that Cowell encouraged the incorporation of non-Western musical materials into both international and American modernist styles, what I am attempting to demonstrate in this chapter is that Cowell shared in what she has shown to be Seeger's relativist and Yasser's evolutionist thinking. All of these interests are evidenced in Cowell's writings and were mutually confirming. Rao's incisive observation of Seeger and Yasser, that "Their Orients are undeniably shaped by their particular inquiries," applies to Cowell's multifaceted Orient as well.

¹⁵² See Isael J. Katz, "Yasser, Joseph," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 9/6/2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu>>.

music and difference (which involved research into musical practices from around the world, the development of musical theories through logical deduction, and the fitting together of the two). Yasser was concerned with developing a theory of the evolutionary development of scales worldwide. He understood there to be a logic by which tonality had progressed through history that would enable him both to place any given culture within this scheme of progression and also, by extension, to predict how tonality would develop in the future. He found that the diatonic scale, with its seven regular and five auxiliary tones, had evolved out of the pentatonic scale, with its two auxiliary tones. The next phase in the evolution of tonality would be a twelve-tone scale with seven auxiliary tones.

Because Yasser found that there was a logical development to melody and harmony, that melody in one part of the world might be seen as a precursor to melody in another, he took the position that it was more important to understand any given melodic practice within the total logic of the evolutionary scheme than according to the theories of its practitioners. It could therefore be said that the pentatonic scale was not “the exclusive musical appanage of a given nation or group of nations or even of an entire race, but simply represents a certain stage of the musical development of mankind in general,”¹⁵³ and that Gregorian plainchant represented roughly the same stage. Terminology derived from one could be used in discussion of the other. He applied the term *pien*-tones, borrowed from Chinese music, to Gregorian chant, with the understanding that the term was relevant for theoretical discussions of both because the two traditions were evolutionarily equivalent.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Joseph Yasser, *A Theory of Evolving Tonality* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1932), 5.

Meanwhile, he claimed that “the Far-Eastern nations [never] possessed a correctly evolved theory of music which would aid them in the exploitation of the intrinsic *resources* of [their own] infra-diatonic scale” (my emphasis).¹⁵⁵ (Yasser’s term “Infra-diatonic scale” meant “diatonic scale of a lower order”: it was the five-tone scale with two auxiliary tones, a smaller and less evolved version of the Western diatonic scale’s seven-tones with five auxiliary tones). Since Far Eastern theory was inadequate, the “logical development of what is potentially involved in this material” became the subject of one chapter of Yasser’s treatise. To Yasser, the theoretical implications of most of the world’s music were beyond the reach of those who did not have access to his scientific, evolutionist “big picture,” and even their musical practices could be criticized for not conforming to its logic. It was the music, and not the scheme that purported to understand its “resources” (conceived of as transcendent of the musicians’ use of them), that was wrong.

It is very unlikely that statements of such arrogance would have been articulated by Cowell, and yet it is one logical outcome of a method of inquiry that was not unlike his own. (I imagine that Cowell would have avoided drawing such a conclusion, but would not have objected to the thought process by which it was drawn.) In pursuing a positivist mode of musical discovery and analysis while holding that certain cultures’ musical practices could be seen as exemplars of that which had been derived deductively, Cowell also left open the possibility that a gap might become apparent between a logically drawn theory and a given cultural practice. This could lead to the “discovery” that the practice

¹⁵⁴ Joseph Yasser, *Medieval Quartal Harmony: A Plea for Restoration* (New York: American Library of Musicology, 1938).

¹⁵⁵ Yasser, *A Theory*, 300.

was in some sense wrong, either misunderstood or improperly practiced by its own practitioners. Cowell in fact did occasionally articulate such a view in regard to one particular culture, that its members did not understand their own music. That was Western culture, as seen for instance in the introduction to *New Musical Resources*, where Cowell asserted that harmony (the special invention of the West) had a scientific basis apart from its usual construal in ordinary harmony instruction. It was only Cowell's concept of a conventional aspect of music, which ran separately from the scientific aspect, that saved the West from an accusation of musical malpractice.

Otherwise, the tension between deductive and inductive aspects of Cowell's project becomes evident at points where he remarked that possible features of melody that had been "discovered" through deductive processes were not to be found among the world's peoples, and thus had no practical value. Rao has suggested that such moments are the result of "two contradictory tendencies": "On the one hand, Cowell eagerly embraces the new scales; on the other hand, he relies heavily on convention to validate these new scales, either referring to the diatonic system, or alluding to the new scales' origin in another culture, or emphasizing their inherent logic. Paradoxically, the newer the territory that he explores, the more he leans on convention."¹⁵⁶ This tendency to view evidence from living cultural practice as the validation for experiment (deduction) was more a feature of this later phase of Cowell's experimentalism. In *New Musical Resources*, by contrast, he had stated that it was not important whether the materials that he had developed logically were in actual use: "The very fact that such materials are built on the

¹⁵⁶ Rao, "American Compositional," 611. The "new scales" that Rao refers to are those built deductively, such as "the six-tone scale (with unequal intervals), the eight- and nine-tone scales, the ten- and eleven-tone scales, the overtone scale, and finally the quarter-tone scale."

overtone series....shows that they probably have potential musical use and value.” At that time, Cowell had argued confidently that if many of the resources he presented had not yet been used, that fact only made “the field which is opened all the richer” (NMR, ix), for now came the opportunity for composers of new music to use them.

The increased importance Cowell placed on conventions (understood as plural) for delimiting the radical possibilities of experiment might be taken as evidence of a growing conservatism. Yet, such a label as “conservatism,” as with so many others, attaches awkwardly to Cowell. His increasing “conservatism” was characterized, not by nostalgia or a return to the comfort of a simpler absolutism, but in an increasing respect for the plural nature of values. This meant that the conventionality his compositions increasingly exhibited (e.g. writing symphonies) was motivated by a deepening of the relativistic side of his views, and a diminishment of the importance of absolute values that had motivated his earlier, more radical tastes.¹⁵⁷ This shift was seen in the 1940 discussion of new music for percussion, “Drums Along the Pacific.” There Cowell found, on the one hand, that experiment was still viable and valuable. Percussion could still be viewed as a new and exciting field, and it could still be understood that the potentials of elements lay latent within them, waiting to be discovered and converted into useful resources:

The string quartet may at times be quite boring as a combination of instruments. Percussion alone may prove monotonous, but it is less apt to, because it is still in a state of experiment. New tones and rhythms are constantly being discovered. When the young experimenters have succeeded in fully exploring the field, there

¹⁵⁷ Commentators have often described post-prison Cowell as conservative, conventional, and increasingly timid as a public figure. Gann remarks that his “publishing activities never really ceased, even while he was in San Quentin...., however, [his role] was no longer so much as a theorist and prophet as a commentator and apologist.” See Gann, “Subversive Prophet,” 195. Gann also remarks that after “his term of imprisonment, Cowell’s articles become milder in tone, more concerned with theoretical soundness, less direct in their attack on opposing schools of composition. Some such mellowing, of course, takes place in the writing and attitudes of any artist. Here, though, the change is sudden and pervasive, reflecting not so much changes in Cowell’s personal convictions as a descent in his public standing” (p. 190).

will still remain the untried possibilities of combining these results with the better-known resources of the full orchestra.¹⁵⁸

But, on the other hand, as seen in Cowell's critique of the Italian Futurists and Varèse, pure experimental development of musical resources could yield results that were "artificial." For Cowell it was becoming clear that the legitimacy of resources discovered through experiment would have to be checked anthropologically (i.e. through discovery of their presence in living cultures).

The United Quartet

If at the time of writing *The Nature of Melody* Cowell was becoming more interested in the conventional, variable dimension of music, he was also expressing interest in the unity among all peoples. His student Harrison much later recalled a series of conversations they had at the time; while in prison, Cowell spoke about his *United Quartet* and the deep unity that he believed connected all humans:

He once told me that it was there [Redwood City Jail] that he wrote his beautiful *United Quartet* (1936, L522) which so handsomely brings together musical ideas from, or certainly suitable to, many musical cultures. Once, when I visited him in San Quentin Prison, he said something which revealed his ecumenical outlook. I had written a string quartet in which I had composed for the sounds of the body of the instrument as well as the strings. I had not known that he had done that too, and he told me how we were all part of an ocean of intelligence over which there was (of course) a surface tension rather like a thin rubber sheet, and that (here he used his index fingers) one would rise up over here and another would rise up over there, and they would look across at one another as though separate, but that they were all the time of one nature underneath.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ "Drums Along the Pacific," 49.

¹⁵⁹ Harrison, 1995, in *The Whole Wide World of Music: A Henry Cowell Symposium*, edited by David Nichols (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1997), 166-67.

Harrison's account indicates that Cowell's sense of clarity about human unity was not entirely dependent upon analysis; yet, even if Cowell's case for universalism was a spiritual one, it was also indeed grounded in the analyses of *The Nature of Melody*. That the *United Quartet* (Quartet No. 4) based its claim to universality on the same logically derived findings laid out in that treatise is evidenced in Cowell's notes to the score, in which he remarked that this "attempt toward a more universal musical style" was "unique in form, style and content," and yet "easy to understand because of its use of *fundamental elements* as a basis... (emphasis mine)."¹⁶⁰ By basing a composition on "fundamental elements" drawn from various of the world's "peoples" ("elements" that he had imputed upon those "peoples" in the first place), Cowell could make this special claim to universality. The "inherent," "non-conventional" aspects of music were understandable to anyone, anywhere, and Cowell ensured universal comprehension by ample repetitions of the materials.

This was one solution to a persistent problem facing composers in the 1930s. By his very original procedure Cowell ingeniously satisfied both the demand of innovation required in his own modernist milieu (despite the work's theoretic universality, it was only within the small world of new music that the work would receive attention) and that of accessibility. Again and again he iterated this point: the work was innovative in spite of being simple because the primary resources it drew upon were not merely those of the European tradition, but those of the whole world:

The Quartet should not only be easy to understand, without following any known pathway, but it should be understood equally well by Americans, Europeans, Orientals, or higher primitives; or by anybody from a coal miner to a bank president. The main purpose of it, of course, is not in its technique, but in the

¹⁶⁰ Cowell, *The United Quartet*, note to the published score (San Francisco: New Music Edition, 1937).

message, which, of course, is not suitable for expression in words. It may be said that it concerns human and social relationships. The technique is for the purpose of conveying the message to the widely differentiated groups who need to be united in these relationships.¹⁶¹

Cowell's statement that the message of the quartet could not be expressed in words may reflect his view that music had a universal layer of inherent meaningfulness that underlay all of its variable forms worldwide, whereas language was historical through-and-through, and there were no words ever capable of being meaningful to all people.

Cowell listed the various principles he drew upon from the world's various "peoples." As in the nature of melody, he referred to these "peoples" not by nation, tribe, or as individuals, but in broadly generalized, categorical ways: "Orientals," "primitives," "archaics," "moderns" and so forth. Strikingly, through this broad categorical approach to the understanding of musical history and anthropology, Cowell could not only claim that he presented an intercultural work, but that he presented a comprehensively intercultural work. "There are in it elements suggested from every place and period." His categories, it would seem, together spanned every corner of the history of humanity. He enumerated some of these categories, and explained how he had made use of the principles that exemplified them:

For example, the classical feeling is represented, not by the employment of a classic form, but in building up a new form carefully planned. Carefully planned form is a classic concept. Primitive music is represented, not by imitating it, nor by taking a specific melody or rhythm from some tribe, but by using at times a three tone scale and exhausting all the different ways the three tones can appear, a procedure of some primitive music; and by its underlying rhythmic beats—like primitive music, but taken from no specific instance. The Oriental is represented by modes which are constructed as Oriental modes are constructed, without being actual modes used in particular cultures. From Western culture, the archaic is represented by foundational harmonic intervals of 5ths, 4ths, and octaves. The classic is represented by the form and development of themes. The romantic is represented by the emotional outpouring of the melodies. The modern is

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

represented by the use of unresolved discords, by free intervals in two-part counterpoint, and by the fact that the whole result is something new—and all that is new is modern.¹⁶²

Cowell did not specify any particular individuals, locations, and dates that might exemplify this “classical” principle of careful formal planning. Such would have been unnecessary, as careful formal planning was the essence of the “classical” style that he spoke of, and as such any careful formal plan could exemplify it (we will witness a similar mode of thinking in the next chapter on Harrison). The “classical” form of the *United Quartet* indeed bore little resemblance to the form of, for instance, a Haydn symphony; yet Cowell argued that in essence his form and theirs were the same.

In brief, Cowell built his highly planned “classical” form out of a five beat rhythmic motive / / ~ / ~ (“/” being a stressed beat and “~” being an unstressed beat). David Hall explains that “This dynamic pattern applies to the beats of a measure, to the measures of a phrase, and to phrases grouped in fives to form the sections. Successive movements begin loud, loud, soft, loud, soft.”¹⁶³ With careful formal planning designated as the essence of “classical” style, Cowell might have regarded his tight micro/macro structuring not only as “classical” but as the very height of “classicism.” This was not a claim that he explicitly made, but it seems to be an implication of the project.

David Nichols has offered commentary on several of Cowell’s above attributions; for instance, that when speaking of “modes which are constructed as Oriental modes are constructed” Cowell meant a variety of non-diatonic modes. Nichols offers the example of the quartet’s second movement (Ex. 10), in which the scale contains two non-varying

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ David Hall, introduction to Henry Cowell, Quartet No. 4 (*United Quartet*) (C. F. Peters).

notes, C and G, as well as variable pitch pairs that allowed scalar movement through the gamut of the twelve tones. He argues that this in fact resembles the *Bhairavi* family of Indian ragas: “Such a wide (and indeed, fully chromatic) collection of available pitches might not be thought of as particularly Indian, but in fact the North Indian family of ragas bearing the collective title *Bhairavi* has the basic scale C, D-flat, E-flat, F, G, A-flat, B-flat, and C. Within this family the particular raga called *Bhairavi* includes the possibility in performance of admitting D in the ascending form of the scale and alternative F and F-sharp in both ascent and descent.”¹⁶⁴ Nichols notes that Cowell could have conceivably been acquainted with such ragas through his 1931 study in Berlin with Professor Sambamoorthy from Madras.

¹⁶⁴ David Nichols, “Henry Cowell’s United Quartet,” *American Music* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 203.

Nichols's observations, if correct, would suggest that, as with Cowell's "classical" designation, his "Oriental" designation involved the induction of a particular principle from a particular observed practice (here the principle was the variability of particular scale degrees in the course of melodic movement), and the imputation of that principle as an essence of the music of a certain broad category of humanity (here "Orientals"). It is also possible that this principle of "Oriental" scales was not derived through such inductive methods but through the deductive ones which he favored in the creation of totalizing systems (similar to Yasser's system, in which "Oriental" scales were understood to be logically in between "primitive" and "modern" ones). It is likely that both forces were at work. In any case, Cowell's further expansion upon the "Oriental" principle, making all of the tones of the scale variable, might then have represented a development of that "Oriental" essence to its logical and scientific limits. In this way, the *United Quartet's* scale would have been more "Oriental" than any in the Orient, just as its form would have been more "classical" than those of any of Europe's past. He did not, however, explicitly make such a claim.

The Schillinger System

Cowell never abandoned his positivist mindset. He maintained, for instance, an enduring enthusiasm for the total systematizing work of Joseph Schillinger, who had been a fellow member of the New York Musicological Society. The *Schillinger System of Musical Composition*¹⁶⁵ (1946) had some similarities with Harrison's *Music Primer*,

¹⁶⁵ Joseph Schillinger, *The Schillinger System of Musical Composition*, 2 vols. (New York: Carl Fisher, Inc., 1946). On Schillinger's idiosyncratic brilliance and his highly successful career as a composition

which came later, and Cowell's own treatises, which came before it: they all purported to be accounts of the reality of music as a world-wide phenomenon and at the same time guides to composition. None of them saw a necessary distinction between the two. Schillinger's was the most radically comprehensive and systematic. He referred to issues of music theory as "musico-scientific problems" and used a form of graphic notation instead of traditional staff notation. His comprehensive theory, based upon rhythm, rather than harmony, was laid out in his composition treatise, which Cowell introduced as representing "a lifetime of work in research, coordination and creative discovery."¹⁶⁶ This was the very tripartite mode of inquiry that, as seen, had been so problematic for Yasser. Schillinger had indeed gone further than Yasser; his system was capable (so Cowell believed) of providing the student of composition with *the* analytical method appropriate to the analysis of *any* material that he might come upon:

The idea behind the Schillinger system is simple and inevitable: it undertakes the application of mathematical logic to all the materials of music and to their functions, so that the student may know the unifying principles behind these functions, may grasp the method of analyzing and synthesizing any musical materials that he may find anywhere or may discover for himself, and may perceive how to develop new materials as he feels the need for them. Thus the Schillinger system offers possibilities, not limitations; it is a positive, not a negative approach to the choice of musical materials.¹⁶⁷

The reader may note a certain disconnect between Cowell's increasing interest in the plurality of conventions and his embrace of such a totalizing theory. Nevertheless, even at this point the two were not necessarily contradictory. Schillinger's system, though totalizing, replaced the inhibiting rules of traditional composition treatises with scientific

instructor (George Gershwin numbered among his many successful students), see Warren Brodsky, "Joseph Schillinger (1895-1943): Music Science Promethean," *American Music* 21, no.1 (2003): 45-73.

¹⁶⁶ Cowell, "The Case for a System," *New York Times* March 24, 1946. Also printed as the introduction to *The Schillinger System*.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

principles, which through logical deduction might allow the composer to move creatively in plural directions. Cowell, along with Sidney Roberts (with whom he had been married since 1941), elsewhere argued that it was necessary for the composer to arrive at his compositional choices using such laws and not merely raw creativity or intuition: the composer at the keyboard differs from a playful child because the composer sets materials “in order, organizes them in accord with some definite scheme of relationship.”¹⁶⁸ These plural “orders” which Cowell spoke of were not precisely things that the composer would give to the materials, but rather were already immanent to the materials. The composer would simply play with this internal order creatively: “The reasons for his choice can never be more than partly objective, but the range of possibilities offered to him may surely be entirely so” (p. 226). It was for this reason that the true composition treatise would necessarily be a hybrid: on the one hand a study of the natural laws of music in scientific style, on the other a manual of instruction. The treatise would carry out each function at the same time in the very same syntactical units and graphs.

The Cowells explained that with the Shillinger system the fundamental properties of all musical elements had been established, charted, and set into equations for use. Shillinger had quite literally “charted the musical range,” which meant that, as Slonimsky had already declared, Schillinger did for music what Mendeleyev had done for chemistry: “he has provided an exhaustive periodic chart of all its elements, making possible the discovery of those that have not yet been used” (p. 226). This new science of music, in establishing a single field in which all musics could be situated, excited the Cowells’

¹⁶⁸ Sidney and Henry Cowell, “The Schillinger Case: Charting the Musical Range,” *Modern Music* 23, no. 3 (1946): 226.

egalitarian sensibilities. Schillinger's system had finally delivered the singular principles by which all musics, including those of modernists (particularly Cowell himself and Schönberg) and non-Western peoples, could be assessed as equal: "The theoretical systems of Hindemith and Schönberg are now seen to be equally logical and find their places within Schillinger's organization of musical theory, along with the tonal systems of India, Persia and Africa, sixteenth century counterpoint, classical harmony, dissonant counterpoint, harmony based on fourths or on seconds" (p. 226)

Besides reiterating the general theme of science having vindicated both modernist music and non-Western musics, the Cowells here returned to the specific concept of musical relativity, a theory of which Henry had claimed to have developed in the 1930 introduction to *New Musical Resources*. Einstein, they now claimed, had turned reality into a flux, the consistency of which it was impossible to have any lasting knowledge:

We cannot know *what it is* but only *how it acts*. Nature then consists of movement and relationship, that is to say, of rhythm. Any natural phenomenon becomes an event in this modern rhythmic conception of the universe; Einstein found that the only objective way of studying these events was to chart their periodicities, with their reinforcement or interference, on a graph. Schillinger believed music might be included among the natural phenomena which can be examined in this way. His system uses a comparatively simple form of Einstein's graph, with its time-space co-ordinates. (pp. 226-27)

It was a concept of "rhythm," then, that formed the link between music as a natural phenomenon and as a social phenomenon. To Cowell, Schillinger had successfully demonstrated that music could be expected to replicate rhythmical processes found in nature, namely "growth, motion, and evolution." Toward the scientific verification of this thesis Schillinger had examined "great works of art." "Confirmation was dramatic, for he actually found in works of the masters the same patterns, expressible in the same formulas which are used to describe the formation of crystals, the ratios of curvature of

celestial trajectories, and the division and multiplication of cells, for instance” (p. 227). This was an important finding, because it demonstrated that musicians, even when composing intuitively and in ignorance of the natural rhythmic laws of their craft, were obeying those laws through intuition. The “great” composers were in fact especially faithful to those laws, and therefore it could be argued that the better the music, the more natural. From there the argument could easily follow that taking a rational, scientific approach to composition would ensure a more thorough engagement of those natural laws than would be possible relying upon intuition alone: the best composer would be a scientist. Cowell did not, however, explicitly state this last claim.

It was not usually Cowell’s style to hold the “great masters” up as exemplars of musical truth; he was ordinarily more interested in relativizing their achievements so as to get out from under them. Yet in this case Schillinger’s method permitted Cowell to reiterate an argument similar to one he had made in *New Music Resources*, that inquiry into music’s natural laws had vindicated the controversial (sometimes ridiculed) techniques of modernists, who could retrospectively be seen to have been intuitively abiding by those laws. Such arguments will be familiar to any alert musicologist, and they are not really scientific. They are circular: the “greatness” of the chosen masters proves that the given property their music exhibits represents an immutable truth of music (incidentally, as these works tend to be long and complex, it is possible to reduce them to illustrations of a wide variety of patterns); meanwhile that property, understood as representing an immutable truth of music, by being present in these works validates the composers’ status as “great.”

Ultimately Cowell saw Schillinger as having dispelled the illusion that art was somehow different or opposite from science. With *The Schillinger System*, art was proven to hold position among other rational phenomena, and all domains of life were now more susceptible to the same styles of scrutiny and categorization. The universe was rhythmic. In the 19th century, the field of biology would have provided the models of internal integration to which music would aspire. Cowell kept the older interest in integration but rejected organicism and looked instead to the logic of Einstein's physics.

Meanwhile, in his own review Seeger observed that Schillinger overshot the science to which he aspired: "One of the basic aims of a logical handling must be to recognize its own limitations in a field."¹⁶⁹ By organizing every conception of music from the known world into a single system, and by making grandiose statements about the importance to music (especially that of the "great musicians") of extrinsic natural patterns (while providing meager evidence), Schillinger had paid too little respect to the unknowable. Schillinger was representative of a recent predilection for the total incorporation and subsuming of the opposing traditional and radical wings of the musical discipline that had been in battle since the start of the 20th century.

Cowell also pointed out that Schillinger had produced a synthesis of the conflicting tendencies of his time, and he articulated the issue in terms reminiscent of his own treatises:

Many have criticized the confusion of style and taste with "law" in music, as being a holdover from nineteenth-century religious thinking. Schillinger felt the trouble lay in a limited and faulty idea of what music is, which resulted in the old anachronistic dichotomies of art and science, art and life, art and nature. Once

¹⁶⁹ Charles Seeger, review of *The Schillinger System of Musical Composition* by Joseph Schillinger, *Notes* 2nd Ser., 4, no. 2 (1947): 84.

these sets of apparent opposites were understood to share the pattern-in-movement, or rhythmic, nature of things, the arts fell into their natural place.¹⁷⁰

Yet, for Seeger, in attempting to present an ecumenical and authoritative answer to these opposing forces, the Schillingers of the world (and Seeger noted that systematizing was a contemporary obsession all the way from “theoretical physics through the social sciences to, lastly, the arts”) fell into their own folly of over-doing “the logical and rational.” In his favored role as “the balancer,” Seeger here found a dialectical process at work, and by observing that Schillinger’s work represented an extreme in need of a balancing antithesis, he was indirectly saying the same of Cowell’s work, especially the sort of work presented in *New Musical Resources*, which Cowell had originally developed alongside Seeger, and of the milieu of the New York Musicological Society in which they had both participated.

Conclusion

After 1940 Cowell’s thinking about cultural difference shifted. In general, after 1940 the sociological aspects of his thinking grew in importance over the positivist music-theoretical aspects. During the Second World War Cowell was employed as a propagandist, programming radio broadcasts for every region of the world. He used the word “propaganda” unapologetically in his published descriptions of these activities: “Propaganda is rather a new word, and we do not often think of it in connection with classic music; yet any music which serves a definite purpose may be said to have some propaganda aspect.”¹⁷¹ Cowell attempted to demonstrate to the world through these

¹⁷⁰ Sidney and Henry Cowell, “The Schillinger Case,” 128.

¹⁷¹ “Music as Propaganda,” *Bulletin of the American Musicological Society* (sept. 1948): 9-11; 9.

programs that the United States was a pluralist society that valued music from all regions of the world and was not controlling of musical expression as were the totalitarian regimes it fought against.

Politics became more central to Cowell's statements about music and difference. In 1954 he wrote, "I used to be almost totally uninterested in politics; but it becomes increasingly clear to me that ethical individualism cannot flourish under radically extreme political conditions."¹⁷² As is obvious considering Cowell's involvement in the Composers Collective, this was not entirely true. During the war and into the Cold War, Cowell spoke out for American style liberal democracy as a necessary first step toward pluralist society and cultural relativist philosophy. His interest in folk music intensified, as the antithesis to urban music, as communal rather than egocentric, and as the basis of a (liberal and democratic) nation: "Folk music is the music of the people, as democracy is government of the people."¹⁷³

In spite of these new inflections in Cowell's thinking after 1940, he also continued to iterate statements of the sort I have been describing throughout this chapter. In the course of advocating that Americans become more actively interested in the musics of other peoples, he made his view that musical difference was based in unilinear evolutionary movement even more explicit. Americans would benefit from studying the musics of other peoples, if they wished to understand the music of their own past:

Moreover, it is possible to find, living today in various parts of the world, types of music which must have characterized earlier periods in our own musical history. Anthropologists believe that the various elements of a given cultural complex appear together. So if a tribe living in the 20th century may be accurately

¹⁷² "'This I Believe' . . .," *Music Club Magazine* (Sept. 1954): 25.

¹⁷³ Outline of an address for the convention of the MTNA, Cincinnati, March 1944, Cowell Coll.

described as belonging to the Stone Age, it may be expected to reproduce the music of the Stone Age just as it has reproduced the more tangible artifacts of the Stone Age of pre-history. Therefore it is possible to say that certain very primitive Esquimo tribes, for example, sing as men of the Stone Age probably sang thousands of years ago.¹⁷⁴

Cowell also used the following explicitly evolutionist logic to justify Cage's work with silence:

The dynamics of silence, a relativity of silence as well as of sound, expressed by rests and extreme *pianissimo*, is a major concern in most of Cage's music. This feeling for the rhythmical pregnancy of silence seems an ultimate sophistication. In primitive music, beats must always be actually sounded; as music becomes more elaborately cultivated there are more and more places in which the beat, once established, may be taken for granted. Sometimes in the improvisatory jam session of jazz players, there will be, by agreement, at fixed intervals in the music, a sudden two-measure silence, after which everyone comes in full tilt with gusto. Obviously the exact duration of two measures and their division into beats must be forcefully present in the minds of the performers during that silence. Cage enjoys presenting longer and more complex silences in the course of his works. Sometimes he leads one toward absolute silence by increasingly greater degrees of softness, until one can hardly tell whether one is really hearing anything or not.¹⁷⁵

As these quotations show, Cowell's later evolutionism was if anything more explicit than in earlier years. One senses that once again the "primitive" music Cowell represented was merely dependent upon a vaguely hypothesized continuum of practices from most primitive to most cultivated, in this case a continuum running from no silence to maximum silence. Cowell's belief in history as logical unilinear development seems to have been strong enough as to make such loosely generated theories of musical change seem legitimate.

¹⁷⁴ "Music Around the World," *Listen* 9, no. 4 (1947): 5.

¹⁷⁵ Cowell, "Current Chronicle," *Musical Quarterly* (January 1952); quoted in David Wayne Patterson, "Appraising the Catchwords, C. 1942-1959: John Cage's Asian-Derived Rhetoric and the Historical Reference of Black Mountain College," Ph.D. diss, Columbia Univ., 1996, 176-77.

As we have seen with his 1946 commentaries on *The Schillinger System*, Cowell remained unwaveringly dedicated to positivist music-theoretical studies and systematizations. His advocacy of the cultural relativist perspective, though intensifying in ardor, continued to be idiosyncratic in its assumption that there were properties immanent to music that might be objectively studied. It was from this basis that he continued to argue for pluralism, as he had in *New Musical Resources*. Musical values were all, ultimately and at their base, singular. Yes, it might seem as though Western music was superior in certain regards, but “the reason for this is simply that different cultures the world over have developed different aspects of music, so that ours is varied where that of other peoples is monotonous, and *vice versa*” (p. 5). Often, he encouraged his readers that by simply repeatedly listening to recordings of unfamiliar musics they would gradually develop a familiarity and understanding of the music.

In maintaining this belief in objectivity into the 1950s, Cowell fell out of step with the cultural relativist current of anthropology as exemplified by Melville Herskovits, in which studious examination of cultural context was essential to the understanding of any and all aspects of a given artifact. It was this latter philosophy that would become most important to the new field of Ethnomusicology. I discuss this current at the end of the next chapter, as a contrast to the concept of music and difference laid out by Cowell’s devoted student Harrison. As will be seen, Harrison’s construction of a “Round World” of non-difference was far more inventive, idiosyncratic, internally coherent, and limited than was Cowell’s “whole world of music.”

Chapter IV: Lou Harrison and the “Whole Round World of Music”

Prelude: The Question of the Double Concerto

When I first encountered Lou Harrison’s Double Concerto for Violin, Cello, and Javanese Gamelan it represented a challenge to much I had learned thus far in gamelan rehearsal and generally as an ethnomusicologist. Having read Clifford Geertz, John Blacking, and other prominent theorists of culture, I had gathered that it was best to talk about non-Western musics with culture-specific terminology—such as *irama* and *laras* for Central Javanese gamelan. These were not translations of Western concepts; they referred to aspects of Javanese music that had no direct equivalents in Western music. Similarly, I understood that the *kepatihan* (cipher notation) we used was not merely an alternative way of expressing something that could also be expressed with staff notation. Javanese music was something utterly different from Western music.

Through further reading in anthropological culture theory I would learn more about the theoretical underpinnings to such choices of wording. I realized that I was both cultivating respect for other cultures and accumulating a body of concepts by which we could conceive of Javanese music from within. There was a history to this approach to the study of non-Western music that was intertwined with gamelan’s very presence in the academy. Playing gamelan was not simply making music; it was a lesson in cultural relativism.

With this learned, Harrison's Double Concerto presented a conundrum. It was a piece that seemed to belong not to one culture but to two, or perhaps to deny the difference between them. It employed two sets of notation, one in *kepatihan* for the gamelan (the "orchestra" of Harrison's concerto) and one in staff notation for the soloists on violin and cello. Rehearsal required the calling-out of two sets of instructions: "Soloists, start at rehearsal 1!" and then, "gamelan, start at gong leading to *irama* II!" Strangely, these parts came together elegantly, consonantly, and yet remained distinct. We seemed to be playing two different works, produced by unrelated intelligences, which somehow fit together perfectly.

How was this possible? As an ethnomusicologist, did I not understand music to be the product of a single culture? Wasn't the music of any particular culture only meaningful in relationship to other meaningful practices of that culture? How then had Harrison created a piece in which two groups of musicians performed their own irreconcilably different musical practices, and yet played together as if they were doing more-or-less the same thing, as if their musics had all along been meant for an encounter with each other? Had Harrison discovered that, after all, these different musics, which we thought were each connected to utterly different systems of significance, were actually only different on their surface? Were we just looking at differences of translation after all? On the other hand, could this piece really be considered Javanese at all, or was it just another case of the Western imagination of the exotic? Was it merely another fantasy?

Introduction

This whole round living world of music—the Human Music—rouses and delights me, it stirs me to a “transethnic,” a planetary music.

Lou Harrison, *Music Primer*

In much of what follows in this chapter, I will temporarily leave cultural relativism aside, and consider Harrison’s own theories of culture. It will be seen that according to Harrison’s worldview, the Concerto for Violin, Cello, and Javanese Gamelan makes perfect sense because it is simply a demonstration of what he saw as the truly shared features of Western and Javanese musics. I will describe how Harrison’s vision of a round, connected world of similitudes permitted him to compose in his manner, and I will call his compositional method of uniting cultural practices from distant world regions “elision.” Harrison saw himself as at a certain point having awakened to “reality,” and so I call the view of the world that he constructed his “reality.” I do not imply that this constructed “reality” was a fantasy. It is the object of this chapter to scrutinize his “reality,” to understand the principles which gave it coherence and the evidence by which it staked its claim to validity, and to suggest how Harrison’s compositions can be understood as clear and meaningful when taken as a part of this “reality.”

By what analytical process, or by what process of rationalization, did Harrison envision “a Whole Round World of Music” with such clarity, and as a composer how did he have the courage to compose that world? I will begin with a brief account of how Harrison came to his “reality,” which it seems he held from around 1960 until the end of his life. Harrison had experienced a nervous breakdown in New York in the late 1940s, and then entered a period of discovery of new principles, culminating in a new cohesive worldview starting in 1960. The next two sections will be analyses of what I see as the

two primary intellectual tendencies by which Harrison constructed and maintained this worldview. First is a grand dualistic scheme by which all world phenomena could be understood as in opposition. Second are the ordering schemes by which various musical and non-musical ideas the world over could be classified.

I then examine how both aspects of this “reality” gave rational basis to some very idiosyncratic views and a very eccentric style of relating to the world that was by turns courageous, defiant, passionate, arrogant, and gracious. In other words, I examine how a particular rational process led Harrison to be a non-conformist. In the final section I return to a discussion of cultural relativism as it has guided the field of ethnomusicology and studies of Javanese music in particular, showing how particular aspects of Harrison’s universalism are troubled in light of those findings. Ultimately I am not interested in championing either theory of difference, but rather in bringing them into a dialogue that exposes the limitations in each.

As I have read Harrison’s writings after 1960 and considered his compositions in light of them, I have become increasingly convinced that his statements are connected by a consistent logic. Harrison seems to have successfully cultivated a personal ethos that in both its consistency and in its expressivity is highly visible and subject to critique. Despite the tremendous variety of materials that Harrison brought to bear in writing music, there is a sizable portion of his body of works that display musical and ideological consistency and integration, and to an extent are analyzable as a body of mutually illuminating documents. Throughout his life Harrison’s knowledge of Asian musics became ever more extensive and nuanced, and yet to a great extent his encounters with Asian musics served to continually reinforce his worldview, and to increasingly supply

confirmation of its foundation upon certain precepts. As such, Harrison's writings and compositions from the last forty to fifty years of his life can to a remarkable extent be viewed as variations upon a single theme, which it will be my aim in the following sections to analyze. Nevertheless, the analysis that follows should not be read as a totalizing "reality" about Lou Harrison.¹⁷⁶

The Dawning of a New Reality: Black Mountain College and the influence of Harry Partch

In this section I discuss some of the conditions leading into Harrison's construction of a new "reality." These include an emotional breakdown in New York in 1947 and a move to the rural setting of Black Mountain College in the North Carolina mountains. I discuss how Harrison was influenced by books he read while at Black Mountain College, foremost among them Harry Partch's *Genesis of a Music*. From this work and others Harrison drew principles about how music could be understood according to trans-cultural concepts, ultimately leading to the possibility of understanding musics from various distant world regions as alike.

Peter Garland has described the 1940s as "the peak of Harrison's involvement with modern music. After studies with Schoenberg, the young composer made the then, and

¹⁷⁶ Harrison's various writings from 1960 onwards generally contain some material that is informative to my analysis, and much else that falls outside of it. For instance, in his article "On Slippery Slendro," published near the end of his life, most of Harrison's observations are particular to his study of gamelan and fall outside of the present analysis. See Lou Harrison, "Thoughts about 'Slippery Slendro'," *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 6 (1985): 111-17.

still now, ‘obligatory’ move to New York City.”¹⁷⁷ Leta Miller has described Harrison’s 1943 move to New York as

difficult financially and socially almost from the start, and the noise level was overwhelming. On July 9, 1943, Lou wrote to his mother: “I do not like New York *at all* and I am afraid that I will not be able to write a note in the midst of this noise and confusion.”¹⁷⁸

Even as his success in New York grew, Harrison suffered from professional insecurity and low self esteem. He was also having trouble finding a satisfactory compositional voice. As he described in a publication about Carl Ruggles, Charles Ives, and Edgard Varèse at the time, he had eclectic musical interests that included the use of serial techniques: “Let it be said without ado that the writer is incorrigibly fond of those American composers who have variously been called ‘primitives, naives, and iconoclasts.’ He is equally addicted to the contemporary Austrian school of 12-tone composition.... On rare occasions he is interested in folk music (these are quite rare) and more frequently in cultivated Oriental musics as they are available on recordings and a few concert performances.”¹⁷⁹ Harrison maintained and developed some of these interests

¹⁷⁷ Peter Garland, “The Music of Lou Harrison: Some Biographical Perspectives (A Preface),” in *A Lou Harrison Reader*, ed. Peter Garland (Santa Fe: Soundings Press, 1987), 8 (*A Lou Harrison Reader* is hereafter cited as *LHR*).

¹⁷⁸ Leta Miller and Fredrick Lieberman, *Lou Harrison: Composing a World* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 25 (hereafter cited as *CAW*); the letter is located among Harrison’s papers in Santa Cruz. I am indebted to Miller and Lieberman’s book for much biographical information on Harrison. Also of particular use for the present discussion has been their “Lou Harrison and the American Gamelan,” *American Music* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 146-78. See also Heidi von Gunden, *The Music of Lou Harrison* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1995).

¹⁷⁹ “Ruggles, Ives, Varèse,” *View* (1945); reprinted in Garland, ed., *A Lou Harrison Reader*, 16-17.

throughout his life, but eventually moved away from many of them, including the use of 12-tone technique in his own compositions.¹⁸⁰

When New York life finally proved untenable, Harrison's friend John Cage encouraged him to seek a change of scenery and a teaching position at the experimental school Black Mountain College in rural North Carolina. In his application for a teaching position, Harrison sent a curriculum vitae that listed, as would be expected, major episodes of his musical training: his studies with Henry Cowell in 1935 and with Arnold Schoenberg in 1942. Near the end, in a section headed "Miscellaneous," was a more unusual item: "in 1947 LOST MIND."¹⁸¹

As Harrison recalled in later years, the move to Black Mountain was a turning point, for him both emotionally and intellectually:

Black Mountain was very stimulating, much too stimulating in some ways. But I formed habits and interests there that have persisted. For example, I can't live in the city anymore. I loathe it. And, uh, I've become completely rural minded in that sense. And Black Mountain helped in that, and a closeness with nature which I had recontacted again after all those... lo, those many years, ten years in Manhattan. You know, that's not.... Well, even dogs leave Manhattan.¹⁸²

In the decade after he left New York, Harrison's most fervent intellectual shift was the gradual rejection of equal temperament, the division of the octave into twelve equal tones that was by then basic to the conventional tonal idiom and to the serialism he had practiced in New York. He rather came to embrace just intonation, an approach to tuning that permitted various strategies of bringing intervals into precise simple ratios. Other

¹⁸⁰ On Harrison's 12-tone works and Schönberg's influence, see Severine Neff, "An Unlikely Synergy: Lou Harrison and Arnold Schoenberg," *Society for American Music* 3, no. 2 (2009) (forthcoming).

¹⁸¹ Harrison's CV is located in the collection of the Black Mountain Research Project, North Carolina State Archives.

¹⁸² Harrison, interview by Marry Emma Harris, 6 March 1973, Black Mountain Research Project, North Carolina State Archives.

new interests followed: though he had always been interested in non-Western musics, in the 1960s he traveled in Asia, and beginning in 1975 he became an avid student of Javanese gamelan, spending much of his last twenty-eight years composing for the ensemble. Harrison met his life partner Bill Colvig in 1967, and with Colvig built instruments, most notably gamelans tuned in just intonation (the Double Concerto that I have already described was composed for the set of instruments residing at Mills College).

By about 1960, the teaming, dissonant world of Harrison's New York years had reorganized into something quieter and more melodic: "I have an advantage that many people have not had, having to reconstruct a life—the rubble and initial vision of realizing that what you had assumed was *reality* was no longer, that your assumptions about *reality* were different" (*italics mine*).¹⁸³ I will hereafter employ this term of Harrison's, this "reality," which developed with remarkable coherence in the ten years following Harrison's breakdown. He used it to refer to the world as it really was; I use it to refer to the world as he constructed it.

Harrison acquired a copy of Partch's *Genesis of a Music* (1949) shortly after his breakdown.¹⁸⁴ He was most distinctly influenced by Partch's detailed explanation of just intonation and the historical development of the science of tuning in the West (and to a lesser extent in China), stretching back to Zarlino and to Ptolemy and further still to Pythagoras. Partch told the history of tuning as a story of both development and decline. On the one hand, the science of tuning had become ever more advanced through the

¹⁸³ Harrison, interview by Heidi Von Gunden, in von Gunden, *The Music*, 95.

¹⁸⁴ Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music* (Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1949) (hereafter cited as *GOM*). The following discussion of Partch's book is cursory. It is meant to introduce some ideological commonalities between Partch and Harrison and not to provide a full account and critique of Partch's ideas.

centuries—in other words, ever more sophisticated solutions were developed to handle the difficulties that tuning in pure intervals presented—while, on the other hand, in general practice what he viewed as the one correct practice, just intonation, had ultimately been drowned out by the most dismal, that of equal temperament. Partch found that in his own time the dominance of equal temperament had become so complete that few musicians even realized that there could be an alternative, that dividing the octave into twelve equal semitones was not in fact simply what tuning was.

Partch argued that the consonance of a musical interval was a factor of the simplicity of the numerical ratio that represented it. The unison 1/1 would be the most consonant interval, the octave 2/1 would be the next most consonant, the fifth 3/2 and the fourth 4/3 would follow, and then the major and minor thirds of 5/4 and 6/5. Actually, Partch only used numerical ratios as interval terminology, doing away with terms such as “fifth,” “fourth,” and “major and minor thirds,” as well as names for pitches such as C, E and G. He regarded the latter symbols as arbitrary, reflective of the sloppy mindset of equal temperament, which with such compromised intervals as its “fifth” of 433/289 (an approximation), rather than a pure 3/2, had only an arbitrary claim to the quality of “consonance.” To Partch it was an “anomaly that we, a mechanically talented modern people, should insist on accuracy to the millionth part of an inch in certain precision instruments, while we nonchalantly accept at least a seventh of an equal ‘semitone’ as an ‘inconsequential’ error in music and dismiss mathematical computations as having ‘nothing to do with music’.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ GOM, 413. Partch here quotes Jules Combarieu’s *Music—Its Laws and Evolution* (D. Appleton and Co., New York, 1910).

Partch believed that small-number ratios and “consonance,” a musical quality detectable by the “human ear,” were indistinguishable. This amounted to a logical collapse of the difference between the objective mathematical properties of sounds and their subjective apprehension. He rejected arguments that what was arithmetically pure and what people found pleasing might be separate separate, taking the enjoyment by some people of impure intervals not as evidence that there might be other viable approaches to tuning, but rather of the general state of deafness and irrationality in which the majority of humanity existed.¹⁸⁶ In this his thinking was self-confirming and non-contradictable. A “good” ear was one that recognized the beauty of “correct” pure intervals and the ugliness of impure ones. The theoretical “correctness” of pure intervals was meanwhile confirmed by their enjoyment by a person with a “good” ear.

For Partch then, composing music became a revitalization of the atrophied organ of “the ear” and a perfect reconciliation of intuition and reason. By contrast, the majority of the world’s musicians, from whatever tradition they came, had not revitalized their ears, had not aligned their reason and intuition, and were ignorant of the truth of just intonation. For Partch, there was little benefit to studying the ways musicians actually made music, as the investigation would be like an a tour of the world under the shroud of an endless night:

Not until we reach the musical equinox do we find the comparatively measurable, the dominant day of precise aural quantities which can be noted in fairly precise aural reactions—ratios, consonances, dissonances. In the dominance of night is a more ineffable value, in which the seen and the heard are out of perspective, distorted by untold ages of prejudice, elusive and illusory, and consequently of

¹⁸⁶ For instance, Partch’s response to Alexander Ellis’s statement that some of the world’s musicians, such as “the Indian,” were indifferent to arithmetic and did all their tuning based on the judgment of the ear was that “up to a certain point, of course, arithmetic and an acute ear accomplish exactly the same results” (*GOM*, 373).

less ultimate concern than those qualities that can be discerned through the intuitive faculties. (*GOM*, 6)

Culture, then, in taking part in the shaping of tuning practices, was nothing more than prejudice. Culture was not at the very essence of tuning, but rather was like dust, clinging to and obscuring pure reason. Properly, intonation would be no more a matter of convention than was gravity. If culture was generally a force of delusion and corruption, Western culture was particularly bad, because it had become completely enslaved to the false ideal of twelve-tone equal temperament. In his devotion to these ideas, Partch was both a fundamentalist and an iconoclast: his radical vision, founded on unmovable principles, set him in fervent opposition to the musical status quo and emboldened him to spread the “truth” by unconventional composing, instrument construction, and the writing of his treatise.

Aside from his interest in just intonation, there was another aspect of Partch’s thinking that was echoed in Harrison’s post-1960 thinking. This was his view of many of the World’s musical cultures throughout history being essentially the same. According to Partch, the “important ancient and near-ancient cultures—the Chinese, Greek, Arabian, [and] Indian” had music of the same essential emotional quality, which was “tactile” and “corporeal,” as opposed to the “abstract,” “disembodied” quality of most contemporary music. The ancient Chinese had roughly the same musical values as did the ancient Greeks 17 centuries later (“corporeal”), and again the Japanese of the 14th-century AD. In the 1600s, Japanese Kabuki was formed as a revival of the original ideals of Noh, and this occurred about the same time as the Tuscan or Florentine reestablishment of the Greek ideals. These correspondences were “no mere coincidence,” but rather were proof

of the essential unity of human behavior when responding to like developments. Like developments yielded further like developments (*GOM*, 13).

Harrison's dualistic division of the world's musics from 1960 onward was not based on precisely the same principles as Partch's, but nevertheless was likely influenced by Partch. The latter, holding that musics alike in one way tended to be alike in many ways, developed a history of the world's musics as divided into these two broad categories of "abstract" and "corporeal." The result of this strict division of the world's musics into two camps was that those on each respective side were drawn into close association. "Corporeality" became the dominant characteristic of all music on its side of the fence, the side Partch liked and regarded as natural. While he appreciated that all these corporeal musics had differences, he viewed those differences as mere surface variations. In their assembled unity, the world's corporeal musics came to exemplify a forgotten human truth that Partch would deploy in a fierce polemic against abstract music, which included all of the popular and high prestige music of his time.

The idea that there were trans-cultural principles by which the musics from various civilizations could be understood to be the "same" was not new to Harrison. He had already been exposed to Cowell's ideas on musical difference, which I have discussed in the previous chapter. Those views would have been corroborated in another text that Harrison studied while at Black Mountain: Fox Strangways's *Music of Hindostan* (1914).¹⁸⁷ Strangways's inquiry took as its point of departure the idea that there were inevitable processes by which music developed, and that these could be observed to have occurred to different extents in different civilizations. He argued that the study of North

¹⁸⁷ A. H. Fox Strangways, *Music of Hindostan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914).

Indian classical music opened a window upon European music of the past, the former simply not having undergone certain of the processes of development that had occurred in the West. India's was a melodic art uninflected by any concept of harmony, representing a stage of the history of musical development that the West had long left behind. Since it had no concept of harmony, contemporary North Indian music could be understood as persisting in the same state as that of ancient Greece: "here [in India] is the living language of which in those we have only dead examples" (p. v).

Whereas Partch had reduced different musical traditions to exemplars of the qualities of "corporeal" and "abstract," Strangways reduced them to "melodic" and "harmonic."¹⁸⁸ This meant that if both ancient Greek music and modern Indian music appeared to both be "melodic," they could be presumed to be roughly the same in other respects as well. The particular characteristics by which civilizations were categorized were observable, repeatable developmental processes with their own inevitable logic: "[in Indian music] is melody absolutely untouched by harmony, which has developed through many centuries tendencies which have the force of laws; and the examination of these enables us to some extent to separate the respective contributions of melody and harmony to the final effect in our own music" (p. v).

It is worth noting that, despite these similarities between Strangways, Partch, and later Harrison, there were also some key differences. Strangways's evolutionist thinking, typical of contemporary anthropology in 1914 (Boas's historically significant challenge to evolutionist ideas in *The Mind of Primitive Man* had been published only in 1911) and reiterated by Cowell, was not reiterated by Partch or Harrison, though remnants of it can

¹⁸⁸ For a sense of what might have been the underpinnings of Strangways's "melodic" and "harmonic," see the previous chapter on Cowell. Cowell also made these two concepts central to both his trans-cultural theory of music and his trans-cultural history of music.

be found in their references to “cultivated” civilizations and “primitive” peoples. To Strangways, any music, wherever and whenever it was made, belonged somewhere along a line of development from the most primitive forms to the most advanced (those were Western Europe’s). Similarities among historically and geographically disconnected musical traditions could be established by determining their equivalent position within this single great line of development. These views were widely held among academics in the early twentieth century (and as such did not need to be stated in detail in *Music of Hindostan*), and Strangways conveyed them without particular cultural arrogance. If European music was more advanced in an evolutionary sense, that was not to say it was in every respect superior: as a “melodic” (pre-harmonic) art, North Indian music was characterized by a much more sophisticated treatment of melody than was European music, and Strangways greatly admired many other aspects of the Indian way of life as he understood it. In contrast, Partch, while seeing a general advancement in the sophistication of tuning technologies, did not believe in more general cultural advancement, but was rather inclined to see history as a story of continuous degeneration. As we shall see, Harrison also became inclined toward this pastoralist “pessimism.”

Harrison’s “Reality” Part 1: Similitudes through Dualism

The knowledge of madness (i.e., that we *are* Mad), & the Vision of Reason (imagination in the light of the former)—the one is Humor, the other is Art. These are the essentials.

--Lou Harrison, *Music Primer*

By about 1960, and from then onwards, Harrison’s writings exhibited a dualistic style of thinking similar to that of Partch. He developed a totalizing perspective on the

“reasoned” and “absurd” aspects of the “reality” in which he lived and was outspoken about each. Various forms of pre-19th-century Western music and Asian musics, in which Harrison became intensely interested during this period, came to exemplify for him the aspects of culture that he regarded as beautiful and sensible. Harrison understood these in antithesis with Western culture, which had degenerated into a state of noisy, mechanized irrationality. As with Partch’s “reality,” Harrison’s was organized into a grand symmetry, in which everything that he held to be good and bad were configured in opposing chains. He did not state the existence of these chains; rather what I am describing are the tendencies of thinking that can seem to have lain in the background of Harrison’s piecemeal statements.

As with Partch, Harrison would come to understand his world as a system of antitheses. Where Partch’s two broad categories had been “corporeal” and “abstract,” Harrison’s pairs of antitheses included

- | | |
|---------------|----------------|
| • Reasoned | Absurd |
| • Country | City |
| • Quiet | Noisy |
| • Ancient | Modern |
| • Natural | Artificial |
| • Hand-made | Machine-made |
| • Just-tuned | Equal-tempered |
| • Mind | Gut |
| • Small-scale | Corporate |
| • Personal | Standardized |

Table 2: Harrison's Chains of Antitheses

Again, while Harrison never put forward this dualistic structuring of “reality” in an explicit way, it remained in the background of his thinking and structured his reasoning from behind. He noted, for instance, that to “learn to tune & recognize intervals you had best go to a country, quiet place.”¹⁸⁹ He did not state explicitly the reason that the country was the setting conducive to the perception of pure intervals, but the reasoning can be reassembled. Harrison found evidence for it in pastoral Ancient Greece, which he saw as indeed a quiet, country setting where rational inquiry was valued and just intonation was studied. The New York that Harrison had experienced in the 1940s represented the antithesis: loud, irrational, and completely taken over by equal temperament. Ancient

¹⁸⁹ Harrison, *Lou Harrison's Music Primer: Various Items About Music to 1970* (New York: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1971), 5 (hereafter cited as *MP*).

Greece and modern New York were, in Harrison's mind, not particular places with cultures specific to themselves (as would be the cultural relativist view that I will discuss later in this chapter). Rather Ancient Greece possessed timeless attributes in accord with nature, which had merely been lost or obscured in modern New York.

Not only were the qualities possessed by Greece and New York not the two particularities of isolated cultures, and not only were those places representative of the antithetical properties that arched over all of existence; what's more, each set of qualities went together, they were each other's preconditions. Anywhere in the world, Quiet, characteristic of the Country, could be deduced as a condition critical in the apprehension of just intonation, and the practice just intonation would be the natural consequent of being in the Country, and so forth. Furthermore, each concept attributed to one side yielded an opposing link on the other, so that any series of deductions in this process had symmetrical effects. As Harrison had observed, New York was thoroughly taken over with equal temperament and the various styles of composition based on it. Thus the concept of the City arose in opposition to the Country, as the place where pure intervals were not to be found, the place characterized by noisiness. Noisiness could be assumed not to be conducive to just intonation, but rather to various forms of cacophony, epitomized by equal temperament.

Harrison's "trans-ethnic" style, his manner of combining idioms and instruments from different parts of the world, was the fruit of this style of thinking. Through their mutual antithesis to the absurd, various musical materials from different distant times and places could be understood to be the same. This meant that if Javanese gamelan and ancient Greek music were both *not* the same as music of modern urbanity, with its equal

temperament and dissonance, its noise and machines, then within the logic of the grand binary scheme they would necessarily be understandable as the same. The generation of such similitudes was a compositional act in which great distance and difference were elided, and the grounds for the sort of harmonious combinations of the Double Concerto were generated.

Harrison was well aware of and freely admitted to Partch's influence in the development of his "reality," in which all good things came together in perfect accord. In the final stanza of Harrison's 1973 poem, "Lines 11 and 3 On Harry Partch," he described having learned from Partch that beauty's singular laws were encoded with numbers, giving form to nature and to the human body. Beauty was beauty, whether in songs or sunlight:

He joins together our brains and ears and flesh!
He is of body sweet and slim,
And as he talks and teaches (fully absorbed)
He slightly chants his sentences.
He grasps and holds us in a sweet reminder
That yes it is our flesh that knows
All these lovely ratios, as we know also
Blooms and loves and tunes and sunlight.¹⁹⁰

Harrison recollected that his reading of Partch while at Black Mountain was an experience of awakening:

I began to tune up the things that Harry Partch had written about in the book. That's all. And I suddenly discovered that what they tell you, isn't true. You know, it was just one more disillusionment. And since my breakdown, anyway, I had been sort of been systematically going back through history to find out where we went wrong [as a civilization], or what could be preserved.... And the sensuous, or the sensual actuality of intonation is true. There's just no getting around it. And once you experience it and know what it consists in, and of, and about it, and obtain some structural visualization of the whole material, the

¹⁹⁰ Harrison, "Lines 11 and 3 On Harry Partch," 1973, in *LHR*, 64.

continuum of tuning and ratios, then you can't go back, and your whole musical life changes.¹⁹¹

Harrison also recalled that at that time he had tuned the Indian scales transcribed in Strangway's book according to principles of just intonation detailed in Partch's book. He had read Virgil's *Eclogues* and concluded that the countryside, and not the city, was where such tunings would emerge naturally. He found that idyllic quality at Black Mountain, and later he would find it again when he settled in Aptos, California. Pastoral settings would become important locations for the proper perception of Harrison's reality:

To learn to tune & recognize intervals you had best go to a country, quiet place for a while. When your ears have recovered their powers & are usable again, begin to tune the simplest ratios on some suitable instrument.... The poet Herrick has said, "So melt me with thy sweet numbers." These are the numbers. (*MP*, 5)

Harrison admitted freely that the development of his interests in just intonation, non-Western musics, and country life was in reaction to what he saw as the factors leading to his breakdown in New York. Critically, he did not simply see this change in his interests as a realignment of his activities to become more fitting with his private, personal inclinations, but rather as a realignment to conform to absolute truths, transcendent of himself and of his own culture. It was an awakening to the "reality" of a beautifully ordered cosmos and to the absurdity of the actual world in which he lived, which did not conform to its principles. Harrison's universalist vision was in this sense a projection of his own experiences of joy and disappointment onto the entire world; the function of the chains of antithesis was the rationalization of his personal likes and dislikes.

¹⁹¹ Harrison, interview by Harris.

The chains of antitheses curled outward, permitting broad historical generalizations and allowing him to tie together things which might not otherwise be thought to be related. For instance in the following statement he correlated the historical rise of the burning of heretics and equal temperament: “In Christian times Europe insisted that everyone had to believe the same religion and in the same way; indeed, burned or killed persons not so behaving; and finally music was to have only one intonation, either ditone diatonic, or in recent years, equal temperament.”¹⁹² Harrison continued this formulation, in which the dogmatism behind the Christian killing of heretics was found to be historically linked with the dogmatism of total standardization of tuning practices, with the antithetic example of the culture of the Greeks, who, Harrison explained, had preceded the Christians with a culture of tolerance, intellectual inquiry, and knowledge of just intonation.

On one occasion, Harrison described Roman culture as another antithesis to the Greeks’: “Gutty they were, the Romans, very ‘ingroup,’ and musically mindless.”¹⁹³ The “gut versus the mind” was a theme that Harrison reiterated: to compose from one’s gut was to compose for sensual gratification and without thought. Composing with thought implied the use of just intonation and careful formal planning. Harrison’s student Robert Hughes has used this terminology in describing Harrison’s own compositional process:

Lou seldom starts out with a gut, sensual idea. Rather, he begins with the scaffolding, which is usually some kind of logically rational preconceived formula that turns loose, as he manipulates the materials into wonderfully sensuous, forward-flowing music.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Harrison, “Four Items,” in *LHR*, 65.

¹⁹³ Harrison, “Refreshing the Auditory Perception,” in *Music—East and West*, (Executive Committee for 1961 Tokyo East-West Musical Encounter), 141.

¹⁹⁴ Hughes, interview by Miller, 12 Dec. 1994, in *CAW*, 206.

The mind, then, was a universal that transcended culture. In the following, Harrison spoke of a unity of reason and aesthetic listening in a manner that was reminiscent of Partch. He preached that once the mind and the ear had been connected, it would be seen that the beautiful in music transcended culture, represented by the gut:

It seems to me that to connect our ears with our minds is necessary to musicality, and that very few of us have made that connection. It little matters, finally, whether our ears are joined to our guts (as the Chinese might say), for, while that connection assures our common group “belongings,” and while that enables us to function in whatever ways our several ethnics permit to us, and while it makes us practitioners of our various arts, it nowise makes us musicians—or, more broadly—artists. I refer, in the latter honorific to the concept of an artist as a “fixer” and transmitter of ideas—as one who “sets” or firmly and truly orders ideas and then transmits them. That certainly requires the mind; and, to us, it requires a connecting of the ears with the mind.¹⁹⁵

As noted, Harrison did not associate machines with reason, but with the noisy absurdity of modern life. Their use in any instance could be understood to demolish beautiful values and mental clarity. Following this line of thinking (arising from the dualistic schema at the background of all his thoughts) Harrison could state: “Predominant practice today is for dancers to use disks and/or tapes while teaching classes, and for accompanying concerts....This is Bad Practice—for it trains in lifeless

¹⁹⁵ Harrison, “Refreshing,” 141. Evan Ziporyn has remarked that for Harrison theory and composition can be understood as a performance in world unity, an injunction to experience the universe as guided by a compassionate rationalism:

“As Harrison’s own words indicate, he is something of a happy polemicist, eager to make connections between musics and to use them to bolster a humane and humanistic outlook on life. Since his theories serve to generate his compositions (rather than the other way around), the “truth” of his ideas resides in his achievement as a composer, not in the ultimate veracity of the ideas behind them. Thus it becomes irrelevant whether or not any existing Javanese *slendro* scales are in fact in just intonation: what is important is that Harrison found a way to make a viable, well tuned “quasi-slendro” and to use it in a compelling way. Harrison’s own writings leave no doubt that that is where his priorities lie” (Evan Ziporyn, review of *The Music of Lou Harrison* by Heidi von Gunden, *Asian Music* 30, no. 1 (1998): 192-93).

I find that Ziporyn’s eloquent assessment of the relative significance of Harrison’s composition and theory is actually the opposite of Harrison’s own view, as is evidenced in the above quote by Harrison. Harrison’s concern, as Ziporyn himself notes, was not merely to be musically persuasive, but to persuade his audience to share his world view, a part of which was the existence of just-tuned *slendro* scales in Java.

(un-inter-responding) rhythm, and it increases the popular belief that Machines are Holy.”¹⁹⁶ Machines were the noisy, lifeless forms of the City’s landscape, and it logically followed that lifelessness and madness would inevitably come from using them.

Harrison appreciated Asian musics in part because he found in them an alternative from modern, industrialist absurdity and equal temperament. This sense of the difference of Asian musics from that which disturbed him came about as much through the reasoning by antitheses as through empirically based discovery. Through a combination of first-hand study and idealistic projection, Harrison came to regard Asian musics as correlated to the pastoral, quiet, just values of the cosmos. “Musical satisfaction,” he remarked, “now lies in the Orient, no longer in the Occident.” Harrison’s attitude toward Asian musics can be characterized as pastoralist, for he saw in Asia forms of beauty that had once been present in the West but now were spoiled.

Harrison was, at the same time, optimistic that the West was spirited along a path toward the rediscovery of the knowledge present in the East and in its own past. In this field, success would come by virtue of the West’s own tradition of experimentation and inquisitiveness, the same spirit of invention that he considered to have originally demolished the West’s own birthright (e.g. “instruments that are simple in construction and permit a wide range of artistic use” and similar vocal techniques). “The occidental nineteenth century much admired engineers, and with delight accepted instruments from them which were fully committed to the false tuning of equal temperament, and which

¹⁹⁶ “Society, Musician, Dancer, Machine—a Set of Opinions Entirely Attributable to Lou Harrison, in 1966,” *Impulse: Annual of Contemporary Dance* (1966): 40, quoted in *CAW*, 185.

absolutely preclude lyric graces or any necessary subtleties of intonation or expression. Engineers will not undo their work, so that artists must.”¹⁹⁷

This was how Harrison saw his task as an artist: as an archeologist and a builder, who would restore that which had been demolished. The artist’s role was to excavate the rubble hidden under the city streets, researching the art of the pre-industrialized West and the contemporary East and reassembling the shards. Though backwards-looking, this vision was radical. If reason and beauty were features of the past, they belonged to such a thoroughly distant past that their reinvigoration represented a challenge to current conventionality and to that which was currently of high status. The history of the West was not, as was often ethnocentrically supposed, a history of progress. On the contrary:

Our studies of the history of intonation give us a new view of music’s progress. Instead of the standard European vision of a long, gradual development leading—with no outside influence—up to contemporary European usages; we discover instead—and on the basis of the richness and diversity of virtual materials—an extraordinary “bulge of expansion” in two major periods, and regression in other times, including our own. The reason for such a new view is, of course, that we are considering the musical materials, not just aesthetical fashions.¹⁹⁸

(Note that in giving weight to the examination of “musical materials” over past “aesthetic fashions” Harrison’s tone here is reminiscent of his teacher Cowell’s.)

Harrison explained that the two major periods of richness were that of the Classic World, ending with a thinning of richness as the “Christians emphasized subscription over investigation,” and then that of Classic Islam. The history of the West was, largely, a story of decline, and with this he remarked upon the achievements of various non-

¹⁹⁷ “Creative Ideas in the Classic Music” [typescript], 1; published as “Creative Ideas in Classical Korean Music,” *Korea Journal* 2, no. 11 (1962): 34-36.

¹⁹⁸ Harrison, “Four Items,” Aptos, 1974, in *LHR*, 65.

Western cultures, which, now in distinction from the absurdity that dominated in the West, could be grouped together among those sites of true cultural advancement:

I think that those of us with “Western” backgrounds have for some time now held a supplementary notion that India and China and Indonesia were “lateral,” sidewise and “static” areas flanking “real,” “marching” history. Thus at least conjecturally granting their true existence outside the “back-to-forwards” movement of the Judeo-Christian-Moslem dramatic pattern. A decision to reckon value on the basis of virtual material usage quickly realigns our historic images. (p. 65)

The sort of dualism I am identifying as characteristic of Harrison’s thinking by the 1960s was in evidence earlier as well, though not in as developed a form. It can be seen in a letter Harrison wrote to Cowell prior to his breakdown in the late 1940s in New York. On Cowell’s advice, Harrison had visited a therapist. Frustratingly, the therapist told him that his music was “ivory tower,” not “connected to the forward-moving masses,” and would benefit from psychoanalysis. Harrison wrote with bitter humor that the therapist was a sort of person differentiable from himself and Cowell: in his arrogance and scientism, his ideas were only a few links away from those behind the creation of the atomic bomb:

He has never heard a note of my music either so how can he say boo about it... well he did anyway. If he is typical, I must say that there are increasingly two kinds of minds today and I am party to the definitely old-fashioned school of thought, *I will certainly not condone anything in a line of thinking that would lead by any diabolical chain of immoralities to such a thing as that horrible atomic bomb.* I think science is going to either wreck us or we will get some sense into our heads.¹⁹⁹ (my italics)

Then Harrison’s stridency cooled, and he mused: “picture of young neurotic defending his neurosis to the end.”

¹⁹⁹ To Henry Cowell, undated (1945?), Cowell Coll.

The logic of loose association found in this remark—whereby through certain vague resemblances, primarily through antithesis with himself and Cowell, the therapist could be regarded as, if not the same as, then very close to the engineer of an atomic bomb—is the same as that which he would later more thoroughly develop into a coherent and comfortable reality. Here, as later, Harrison linked together things that he found distressing—a psychologist’s arrogance and that which led to the atomic bomb—so as to more assuredly reject them. Yet, if this habit offered assurance, it might have at the same time created additional stress by heaping negative significances onto concerns that would have been less troubling if considered in isolation. Dualism, as such, might have not only been the way out of Harrison’s emotional problems, but also a contributing factor to his original breakdown.

An even earlier indication of such dualistic loose association is found in a letter Harrison wrote to Olive Cowell in 1937, written soon after the imprisonment of Henry. Harrison confessed the agony over his mentor’s imprisonment, and conjectured upon a division between two sorts of people, “good” and “evil”:

The day before I left I read of Henry’s sentence, and I want to tell you how it agonizes me. This seems not such an unjust world as totally justiceless. . . . I cannot say how this whole thing has affected me, the strength of ignorance and prejudice and the prevailing lack of balanced perception in the great mass was never so wholly apparent to me before. It seems that all one can do to be good in this world is to follow one’s own precepts. . . . If you take any but your own ideas, corruption has begun in that very process. What irritates me more than all else is the compromise. Those who haven’t sufficient strength of perception to carry an idea thru to its most ridiculous conclusion, and who will go “so far” and then say “but after all,” those are the ones who are the forces of evil as I see it.

Caution, moderation; these are the words that make the thotways [*sic*] of the uncreative. These are the words that corrupt and confuse the creative world, and I imagine that there never will be found any understanding or balance between the productive and the unproductive types. And the tradgedy [*sic*] of it all is that the

good, productive, penetrative, and holiest life seems by this arrangement to be unhappy at best, almost inevitably.²⁰⁰

Though Harrison indicated in the letter that he did not know the precise nature of Henry's crime, it is likely that he knew it was a homosexual offense, and it is possible that his anger was not only an expression of loyalty but also an expression of his own sense of victimization by a homophobic society. It is possible that his dismissal of intolerance in the "great mass" as a force of evil might have empowered him to expel the force of popular opinion from himself.²⁰¹ Yet, here at the age of twenty Harrison did not explicitly identify the mass's evil "thotways" with homophobia, or more generally with intolerance, but rather with an unwillingness to follow an idea to its "most ridiculous conclusion." He was, in other words, declaring that rationalism to the point of "ridiculousness" was good and creative.

This may seem to be an odd notion to champion, but it was indeed the style of thinking that characterized Harrison's later reality. And although the harshness and woundedness of the letter to Olive Cowell would not remain characteristic, there was a pronounced negative side to his universalist sentiments of later years. All points in Harrison's Round World of Music were linked only through mutual antithesis to the forces of absurdity. Great distances of time and space, such as that dividing ancient Greece and Indonesia, were elided into a cozy, non-differentiated proximity (rather than severed by jagged ideological conflict), but only through dichotomization with the overwhelming forces. The trans-cultural nature of the good gave rise to the perception of corruption, for indeed the perceptible world did not conform to Harrison's ideals.

²⁰⁰ To Olive Thompson Cowell, 21 August 1937, Cowell Coll.

²⁰¹ For Harrison's account of being gay in San Francisco during these years, see his interview with Winston Leyland, Aptos 1973, reprinted in *LHR*, 70-84.

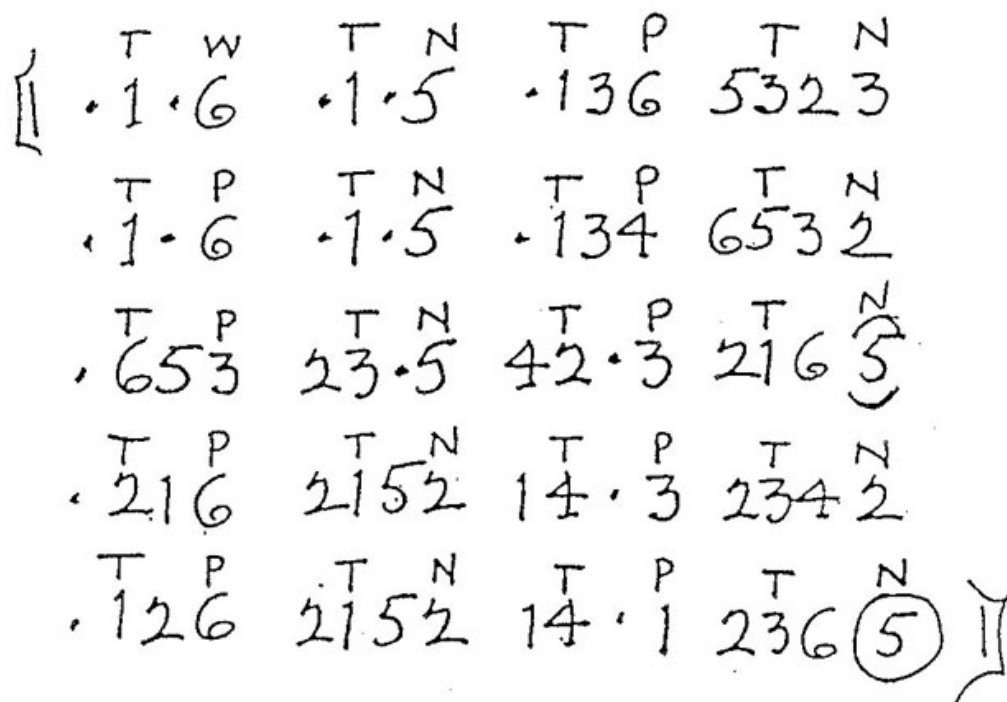
Meanwhile the presence of corruption was a necessary element against which to define the good things and bring them into a seeming solidarity.

The belief that reasoned musicianship transcended culture permitted Harrison's intercultural manner of composing. Harrison combined materials of distant origins, with a degree of indifference to those origins justified by the belief that at root the materials were the same. He assembled a composition that exploited those apparent similitudes, while allowing the different origins of the materials to remain apparent. Such elision of culturally distant musical voices can be seen, for instance, in the titles of the movements of the *Concerto for Violin, Cello, and Javanese Gamelan* (1982). First are the titles of the outer movements, "Ladrang Epikuros" and "Gending Hephaestus." *Ladrang* and *gending* are both formal structures of Central Javanese *karawitan* (the gamelan repertory), while Epikuros and Haphaestus are the names of a Greek philosopher and a metal-working god, that latter perhaps chosen as an appropriate object of homage for hammer-wielding gamelan musicians or perhaps as an allusion to the apocryphal story of Pythagoras's discovery of the physics of tuning on blacksmith's hammers.

Elisions are apparent in the meter of these two movements, which in its feeling hovers ambiguously between Western meter and Javanese *karawitan* (the music played on gamelan). Indeed, the scores Harrison wrote for use by the soloists and the gamelan orchestra are not the same: the former conveys the logic of Western meter through staff notation, and the latter conveys the logic of *karawitan* through its conventional cipher notation.



Ex. 11: Excerpt from *Gending Epikuros*, Violin Staff Notation



Ex. 12: The same excerpt, Kepatihan Notation

While this sort of elision was powerful as a compositional technique, as a manner of representing the world “out there” it could be highly problematic. Many of Harrison’s statements were shrouded in a peculiar haze: was he describing the world as it was or was he “composing a world” (a phrase I borrow from the title of Miller and Lieberman’s book)? As noted, the process of elision (in part through mutual antithesis) could take on a life of its own and produce similitudes for which there was no empirical support. Some of these Harrison did not directly verbalize, but nevertheless they can be found implied among other assertions which were logically founded upon them. I have not, for instance, found Harrison to have written in the most direct manner that traditional Indonesian music employed just intonation. He implied it, for instance, in the above statement that “musical satisfaction now lies in the Orient”: Harrison reasoned that the composer must turn to the Orient because of the destruction wrought in the Occident by engineers who were “committed to the false tuning of equal temperament.” To suggest that we must return to the Orient because of the false tuning of the Occident amounted to an attribution of just tuning to the Orient without making the statement in the most explicit terms.

Harrison also implicitly attributed just intonation to Javanese music in a note introducing his 1961 Concerto in Slendro, by describing his “slendro”²⁰² with a series of numerical ratios, and remarking that this “slendro” was in “correct ‘just intonation’.” He did not explain in what sense the tuning was “correct.”²⁰³ Was it correct in the sense of “authentically Javanese,” or was it correct in a more absolute sense, with the implication that it might be even more correct than *slendro* found in Java? The meaning of this

²⁰² Slendro is one of the two sorts of scales (or tunings) in Central Javanese gamelan. The other is pelog. Ensembles will often consist of two sets of instruments, one in slendro and one in pelog.

²⁰³ Lou Harrison, *Concerto in Slendro* LP liner notes, New York: Desto Records DC-7144

statement will become clearer in the discussion of Harrison's modes in the next section. What is important here is that at moments Harrison's "reality" seems to be transcendent of the earthly reality: it was not a sticking point that his representations of other cultures be in fact accurate, as what he was ultimately seeking to represent was something higher and more reasoned than the pettier reality of the actual world.

The correlation between Javanese gamelan and just intonation does make sense within Harrison's dualistic model of similitudes and antitheses, in which just intonation and gamelan were both *not* products of industrialized modernity, and their similarity was established through their mutual antithesis to that modernity (corresponding to equal temperament). Stated differently, Javanese music, clearly not belonging to the Western tradition of art music or of popular music, could be classified in the alternative category of ancient (natural) musics. Therefore it belonged to just intonation and just intonation belonged to it. To articulate this process of reasoning probably would not have seemed sensible to Harrison, nor would it have felt quite right to state the ultimate conclusion in the boldest terms, as there was no direct evidence for it, but the governing dualism permitted statements that ultimately confirmed it.²⁰⁴ As noted, the dualism also inspired

²⁰⁴ Harrison's sort of dualism is quite like E.T.A. Hoffmann's as described by Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. Roger Lustig (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989): 43. Hoffmann's worldview was as perfectly (and occasionally as problematically) symmetrical as Harrison's. According to Dahlhaus: "Dichotomies such as 'ancient-modern,' 'heathen-Christian,' 'natural-supernatural,' 'plastic-musical,' 'rhythm-harmony,' 'melody-harmony,' or, finally, 'vocal music-instrumental music' combine into a system that, while never appearing as such, steers the arguments from the background, as it were. Hoffmann's concatenation of antitheses is doubtless a logically questionable enterprise. Put bluntly, the process consists of nothing but the association of a pair of quite obvious opposites with other similar pairs in such proximity that finally each category on one side ('ancient,' 'heathen,' 'natural,' 'plastic,' 'rhythm,' 'melody,' 'vocal music') simply melds together with the others and may be brought into contrast with all the categories on the other side ('modern,' 'Christian,' 'supernatural,' 'artificial,' 'musical,' 'harmony,' 'instrumental music')."

Dahlhaus tells us that through Hoffmann's system of dichotomies he was able to produce assertions without ever actually asserting them: "Hoffmann alludes to the idea of associating 'classical' music with the esthetic idea of the beautiful, and, in contrast, 'romantic' music with the sublime, without ever expressing it in unmistakable terms." It would seem that the trick in both cases was to speak in elaboration

the physical tuning of gamelans in just intonation and the creative combination of Western and Javanese instruments into various consonances in his compositions.

Late in life Harrison expressed some uncertainty that all tuning practices world-wide could really be understood in terms of simple ratios. This was no radical dismantling of the reality. Yet it was a subversion: Though Harrison's meaning is not perfectly clear to me, it seems that in a keynote address to the Microtonal Society in 2001 he suggested that the idea that just intonation (or was he in fact rather referring to Pythagorean tuning?) could explain all the world's intonations was the same sort of falsehood as the belief in the equal-tempered scale. Such would be a refutation of a core tenet of his earlier universalism (It is clear from this address that Harrison had not entirely abandoned his world view, only that he was admitting a "fracturing" in it):

I am sure that each of us has a view of "what went wrong" to surround us almost everywhere with the dull industrial gray of a global monoculture in twelve-tone equal temperament. My own view is fractured. I have the feeling that many over the years have hoped that somehow, if a person went far enough in cycling fifths—actually true 3:2s—she would find that this simplest tuning pattern of all would "transubstantiate" into all the other intervals. Pretending that such is possible seems to me one way of entering that wish-fulfillment dream world which now pervades music everywhere that "the West" has settled in. The West is, of course, Northwest Asia, which is Europe and its satellite cultures. The other part seems to me economic. Imagine being able to "mechanofacture"—for there is little "manu" in it—rank upon rank of theoretically different instruments, tuned all the same, and interchangeable everywhere on the planet. What a supercorporation the whole thing implies. And, indeed, to my mind that is what it is.²⁰⁵

Despite the "fracturing," this quotation exemplified the language that Harrison had been employing for decades. He had by that time spent much of a lifetime combating the "dull global monoculture in twelve-tone equal temperament," against industrial

of this unarticulated, dichotomously structured "background" to the point that those correlations and those antitheses that were left unstated were nevertheless communicated, intrinsic as they were to the whole.

²⁰⁵ Lou Harrison, "Microfest 2001 Keynote Address," *The Journal of the Just Intonation Network* 10, no. 4 (2001): 1.

modernity of the 19th and 20th centuries, as he understood it. His battle strategy was to construct an appealing universality of everything else: of that which came before (the pre-19th-century West), of that which existed outside (Asian cultures), and of that which was in rebellion (certain 19th- and 20th-century artists, mostly his own modernist colleagues). He had advocated locally made instruments and against “supercorporations” for decades. It is unclear whether at this late point he continued to understand his own principles as necessarily underlying such hand-made objects, different as they were from the standardized, machine-built objects of industrialized modernity.

For the alert reader, the sorts of broad generalizations about the “East” necessary to carry out this strategy will be suggestive of the colonialist thinking described in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. It is worth saying, however, that Harrison’s manner of thinking was in one respect different from that described by Said. This is not because Harrison held the East in high regard (which would not in itself set him apart), but more importantly because Harrison’s statements were not attempts at constructing clear boundaries between a Western “us” and an Eastern “them,” but rather in dismantling such boundaries. Even while he deployed his own generalizations, Harrison described a reality in which the “us” (the group with which Harrison positively self-identified) was configured as opposed to the mainstream of Western culture but not opposed to the East. Harrison’s mainstream “them” was absurd, omnipresent and dangerously close; his “us” included a community of rebellious artists in the U.S. and peoples on the far end of the globe.

In that sense Harrison’s dualism rejected rather than affirmed the sense of a differentiable East and West. His effort at decentering the West, and indeed dissolving it

as a concept, is exemplified in his terminology (already witnessed in the statement to the Microtonal Society quoted above) by which he turned Europe into “Northwest Asia” and America into a “satellite culture” of Europe or on other occasions into “Usonia.”²⁰⁶ Harrison often placed “the West” in quotes, indicating that, rationally speaking, there was no such place. Note how much Harrison’s view is like that of the Orientalists, described by Said below, in terms of its dualistic building of opposing chains, and yet how his divisions of its “us” and “them” fall along different lines from theirs:

One of [the historical/cultural circumstances out of which Orientalism emerged] is the culturally sanctioned habit of deploying large generalizations by which reality is divided into various collectives: languages, races, types, colors, mentalities, each category being not so much a neutral designation as an evaluative interpretation. Underlying these categories is the rigidly binomial opposition of “ours” and theirs,” with the former always encroaching upon the latter (even to the point of making “theirs exclusively a function of “ours”).... “Our values were (let us say) liberal, humane, correct; they were supported by the tradition of belles-lettres, informed scholarship, rational inquiry; as Europeans (and white men) “we” shared in them every time their virtues were extolled. Nevertheless the human partnerships formed by reiterated cultural values excluded as much as they included. For every idea about “our” art spoken for by Arnold, Ruskin, Mill, Newman, Carlyle, Renan, Gobineau, or Comte, another link the chain binding “us” together was formed while another outsider was banished.²⁰⁷

As will be seen further in the next section, division and ordering were replete in Harrison’s schema, and yet they had nothing to do with creating divisions based on language or race, but rather had the reverse effect of unifying diverse cultural products under a set of trans-ethnic categories. It cannot be denied, however, that Harrison’s strategies required him to construct an Orient that suited his own “reality,” and in that respect he exemplified the mentality described by Said.

²⁰⁶ *Usonian* was a term invented by Frank Lloyd Wright to refer to Americans. Also *Usono* means American in Esperanto.

²⁰⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 227-228.

The “Reality” Part 2: The Construction of Similitudes through the Hierarchical Ordering of Trans-National Musical Concepts

Documented in Harrison’s writings is a “reality” that, besides uniting worldwide practices in a dualistic scheme of the “reasoned” versus the “absurd,” also united them in a plethora of ordering schemes. These orderings were hierarchical:²⁰⁸ their assemblage and classification of world-music concepts were done from the top down, proceeding from large abstract concepts.²⁰⁹ The concepts, for the most part, were trans-cultural: the exemplars of “pentatonic,” “opera,” and even “Baroque” could be found anywhere in the world. Harrison’s biggest compendium of such orderings was the *Music Primer*, which I will discuss below.

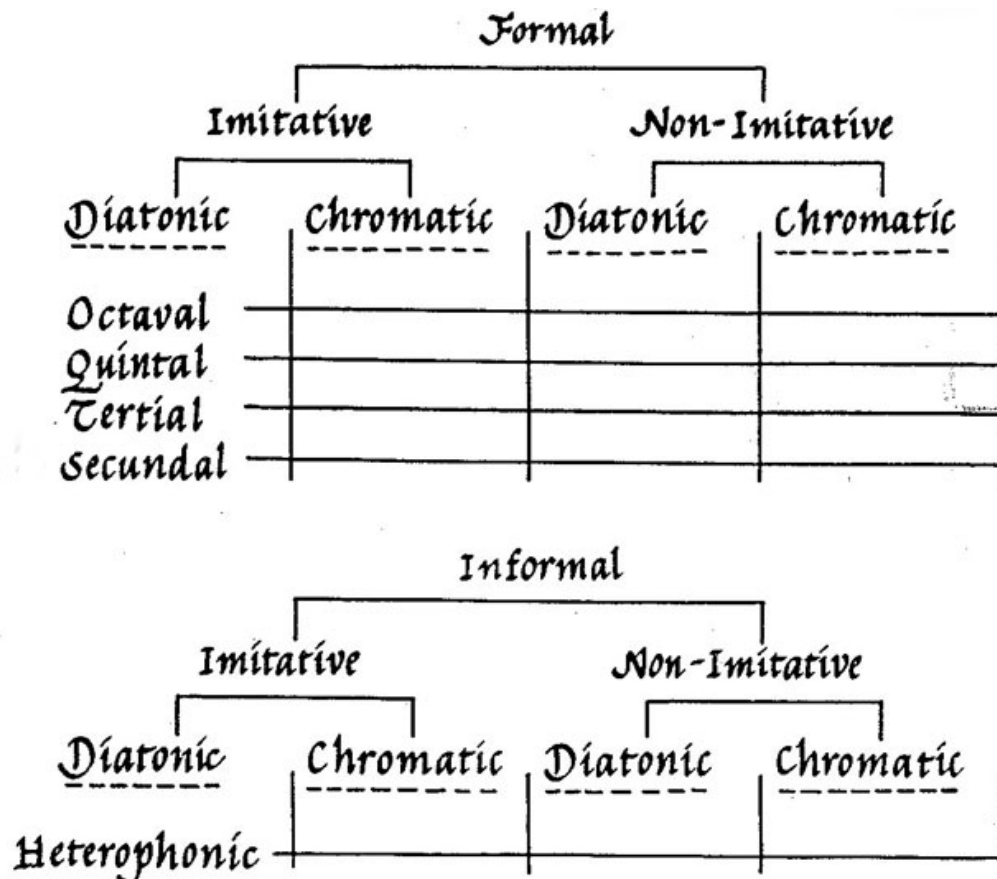
These orderings schemes functioned in part as aids for the composer. For instance, in the *Music Primer* Harrison laid out a classification of melodies as “Base, Middle, & Full,” each designating an increasing degree of completeness of a precomposed melody and a decreasing responsibility on the part of the performer to add ornamentation (*MP*, 11). Elsewhere, toward a transnational ordering of contrapuntal methods, Harrison

²⁰⁸ Hierarchy here does not suggest that Harrison was ordering world cultures in terms of their advancement from the most primitive state to the most cultivated states. There are, though, traces of that way of thinking evident in Harrison’s distinction between the world’s “cultivated” and “primitive” societies, terms reminiscent of cultural-evolutionist notions of unilinear development of human societies from less to more civilized states.

²⁰⁹ My analysis in this section has been aided by Charles Seeger, “Reflection on a Given Topic: Music in Universal Perspective,” *Ethnomusicology* 15, no. 3 (1971): 385-98. If I understand Seeger correctly, he differentiates between hierarchical orderings that proceed from broad abstract concepts and systematically subdivide into smaller units, and taxonomical orderings that proceed from individual percepts, which are grouped into increasingly encompassing categories. Harrison’s orderings are consistently of the former variety.

proposed “Formal” versus “Informal” as the uppermost categories, with subcategories of “Imitative” versus “Non-Imitative,” and further subcategories of “Diatonic” and “Chromatic,” and so forth on down (*MP*, 12). He attested that each of these kinds of counterpoint “abounds in world musics.” Harrison suggested further that “Differentiated” and “Non-differentiated” were useful concepts in the ordering of contrapuntal styles:

“Some Bach Chorale Preludes & Balinese Gamelan works have voices widely Differentiated in style—a rapid, figurative voice counterpoints a slow & vocal chorale, etc., while Palestrinian voices all move in a very similar way & are Non-differentiated” (*MP*, 13).



Ex. 13: Chart from *Music Primer*

The ordering scheme in which Bach Chorale Preludes were equated with Balinese Gamelan can be taken as exemplary of Harrison's manner of making practices from opposite ends of the globe representatives of larger trans-cultural concepts (in this case "Differentiated Counterpoint"). Harrison's ordering schemes were based not on cultural evolutionist theory, but on an alternative vision of the relationships of the world's musics in which culture and nation were in fact relatively unimportant, and cultural "advancement" was meaningless.²¹⁰ As compositional tools, aside from their explicit function of systematically enumerating possible compositional techniques, Harrison's hierarchies allowed the discovery of new similitudes among the world's musics. Whereas dualism had permitted the discovery of similitudes through mutual antithesis, ordering permitted their discovery through typology.

Though some of the transnational musical types yielded by these hierarchies were not uniquely Harrison's—he grouped many scales from around the world under the familiar category of "pentatonic"²¹¹—in other cases the association of elements under Harrison's transnational concepts was inventive. He once remarked upon how certain Korean pieces belonged to the category of "Baroque": "Sujechun (and a few other works—Chn Peh Hyi

²¹⁰ Eric von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs's hierarchical taxonomy of instruments was another transnational ordering scheme that was not based on evolutionism or diffusionism. It is presented in "Classification of Musical Instrument," trans. Anthony Baines and Klaus P. Wachsmann, *Galpin Society Journal* 14 (1961): 3-29; originally published as "Systematik der Musikinstrumente: Ein Versuch," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 46 (1914): 553-590. René Lysloff and Jim Matson have critiqued the principle of hierarchical taxonomy upon which the *Systematik* is based, and upon which they argue all subsequent systems for organizing instruments have been based. See their "A New Approach to the Classification of Sound-Producing Instruments," in *Musical Processes, Resources and Technologies*, ed. Kay Kaufman Shelemay (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1990), 213-236.

²¹¹ The universality of pentatonic scales has been seriously considered among ethnomusicologists as well. See Van Khê Tran, "Is the Pentatonic Universal? A few Reflections on Pentatonicism," *World of Music: Journal of the Department of Ethnomusicology, Otto-Friedrich University of Bamberg* 19, nos. 1-2 (1977): 76-91.

Mun, and Hae Ryong among them)” employed an antiphonal use of contrasting instrumental groups and could thus be categorized with the orchestral groups of the Concerto Grosso form. “Actually, Sujechum is a Baroque work, aesthetically, and a very great one—a splendid expression in Korea of that last true aesthetic of mankind (which was world-wide).”²¹²

Even Harrison’s pentatonic classifications were eccentric. He adopted the Javanese words “slendro” and “pelog” as pentatonic categories referring, not specifically to modes from Indonesia, but rather generally to anhemitonic and hemitonic modes respectively (modes without and with half-step intervals).²¹³ In the *Primer* Harrison represented various “slendro” and “pelog” modes through the ratios of just intonation. More than simply borrowing the terms “slendro” and “pelog” for his system, Harrison implied that the Javanese theory behind the terminology was the same as his own:

Crossing the Pacific on a freighter I began a little list of pentatonic modes, some of them already known to me and some of them noted as possibilities for future investigation. I suddenly realized that European music theory lacks any usable classification or naming system for penta-modes—an astonishing lack, I think. During the same trip I also composed a little Violin Concerto for a friend. This I wrote in “anhemitonic pentatonic,” modes (only two of them), and, since Indonesians use the term “Slendro” to mean “anhemitonic pentatonics,” and, that term being shorter and lovelier, I called the piece “Concerto in Slendro.” (*MP*, 26-27)

For Harrison, it was clear that the Javanese concept of “slendro” was the same as his own concept of anhemitonic pentatonics, and, seeing his own concept as of trans-cultural applicability, he saw no reason not to likewise use the term “slendro” as a trans-cultural

²¹² “Creative Ideas,” 3.

²¹³ It may be that Harrison preferred not to use the terms “hemitonic” and “anhemitonic” because, in making the semitone integral to their definition, they perpetuated a bias toward equal temperament.

descriptor. Though the reasonableness of this was obvious to Harrison, the critics of Concerto in Slendro (1960) did not understand:

Well—the “Western” critics wrote that my piece was composed in “Exotic Indonesian Modes.” Since the two modes concerned are the simplest and most widespread modes on the planet, two things were clear: 1) Some critics are deaf. 2) “Westerners” do not regard it as really possible (or if possible, then fair) for other than Europeans to invent or already to have invented good clear theory &/or terminology about anything except maybe about religion. (Europeans have never invented a major religion.) (*MP*, 27)

In Harrison’s ordering, all pentatonic scales were represented as varieties of one of four categories: “Prime Pentatonic,” “Slendro,” “Pelog,” and “Mixed.” All were expressed via numerical ratios; for instance, one version of the “Prime Pentatonic” was written 6/5 10/9 9/8 6/5 10/9, each ratio designating a consecutive interval (he also provided the ratios between each of the ascending notes and the fundamental, in this case 1/1 6/5 4/3 3/2 9/5 2/1).²¹⁴ Harrison called this manner of representing modes via just intonation “the only sure demonstration” (*MP*, 27). His meaning in this statement, as with others of its kind, is unclear. Was it that through these simple ratios one was sure of getting the most accurate representation of the pentatonics of various cultures, or that one was sure of getting a cornucopia of “correct” pentatonics, rather than what might characterize actual practice? I believe that Harrison was vague because the point remained ambiguous in his own mind, as either a matter of “reality” as it was or (and) as he composed it.

In the realm of Harrison’s compositions, this ambiguity was simultaneously important and irrelevant. It was important because in a work like the Double Concerto instruments

²¹⁴ Besides expressing the Prime Pentatonic (“The Human Song”) with ratios, Harrison wrote scale degrees. In one version, it was 1 flat-3 4 5 flat-7 1. In other versions it was 1 2 flat-3 5 flat-6 1 and 1 3 4 5 7 1. “Slendro,” “Pelog,” and “Mixed” modes were not written with scale degrees, only ratios.

of different cultural origins were apparently made to truly play a single pentatonic scale together in tune, the sort of thing that would be possible if the world's musicians were in fact conforming to Harrison's pentatonic ordering scheme. It was irrelevant because in Harrison's compositions he himself created both the theory and the music itself, and so his ideas on the similarity among different musics, though cloudy in their relation to the world's various musical practices, became a cloudless representation of the fact. The Double Concerto premiered on the Mills College gamelan, which Harrison and Colvig themselves created and tuned in pure intervals. This, in a sense, settled the issue of whether gamelans are tuned with pure intervals, for indeed at Mills College there was one.

Harrison did not specify whether this catalogue of modes, which he said "constitute every human's most important tonal inheritance" (*MP*, 27), had been discovered via observation (field work) and then organized inductively into categories or if they had been developed by mathematical deduction and then attributed to various cultures after the fact. I suspect it was a combination of the two, with more of the latter than the former. What is certain is that Harrison was not interested in the theories behind intonational practices other than his own. It would have been out of character for him to have called non-Western understandings of intonation "irrational," but he nevertheless did voice his indifference on the subject. In front of a mixed assembly of Asian and Western musicians at the 1961 Tokyo East-West Conference, he announced his disinterest in local, "magical" understandings of intonation:

Now the Westerner will tell you that the notes are C, D and E. The Indian says, "the cry of the peacock and the trumpet of the elephant" (or some such): the Chinese indicates the "tones of the Emperor and his Prime Minister"—or whatever. All alike are magical names, they give no information. But when

Ptolemy said, for Syntonon Diatonon, 10/9-9/8-16/15-9/8-10/9-9/8-7/15 [*sic*], he gave an analog of the true events—and so we may tune this tuning precisely as he did then in Alexandria, as it sounded through the beautiful museum there.²¹⁵

As seen, similarly with Harrison's dualistic reality, in which two things that might seem to be separated by a great chasm of difference could be collapsed together via a mutual antithesis, Harrison's ordered reality connected dissimilar concepts by placing them in a common category. This led to some highly original forms of argument. In one case, Harrison put this logic to a pragmatic end in a plea for preservation and expansion of the Chinese opera in the U.S.. On a large, elaborately calligraphied sheet of paper, he called for greater financial support for the suffering art form. Chinese opera was one of two of the world's operatic traditions, and as such to allow the art, presently struggling, to die because of financial troubles in the richest nation in the world would be worse than criminal: it would be "nonsense." Integral to Harrison's argument was the art form's status as Opera, a category that transcended nationality. Harrison reasoned that Opera had two sub-categories, "Chinese" and "Western," and since both were practiced in the U.S. both could legitimately be called American. American Opera in all its forms must be supported.²¹⁶

A few ordering schemes not already described include nine ways of varying a motive; two ways of handling intervallic content ("Strict Style" and "Free Style"); three varieties of rhythmic modes (Hindu, Islamic, and European medieval); a catalogue of forms (especially dance forms); four motivations for composition (voluntary, suggested, requested, and commissioned); and three ways of using the Fibonacci sequence. Chinese

²¹⁵ Harrison, "Refreshing," 142.

²¹⁶ This plea appears among Harrison's papers at the University of California at Santa Cruz without date.

opera was the world's most "complete musical theatre," because it fulfilled every sort of text-musical relationship: "Plain speech, unaccompanied. Plain speech accompanied. Rhythmitized speech unaccompanied. Rhythmitized speech accompanied. Song unaccompanied, etc., up to & including Chorus accompanied" (*MP*, 27)

Harrison's organizational impulse at one point led him to propose a world center for world music. At the 1961 East-West Conference in Tokyo, he drafted a description (not published in the proceedings) of a rather large building that would house musicians from all the world's traditions, particularly the "civilized" ones. The problem to be addressed was that these groups were, at the present moment, metaphorically divided into "four large music rooms," meaning that, "Although the musicians from the Sino-Japanese, the European, the Hindu, and the Islamic rooms are indeed on speaking terms, still, each knows only a bit about the knowledge and the traditions of the others." Harrison's institute would break up these cultural divisions, and instead would reorganize the civilized world's musical knowledge into "1) a Mode Room, 2) a Library (for books, printed music, and sound-recordings), 3) a Workshop—for theory, techniques, and the entire instrumentality--, 4) a print shop-for the spreading of the knowledge of the institute, and by those knowledges to help the less evolved musical cultures towards their natural flowering, if they would want that."²¹⁷

Later, Harrison described his idea for the mode room in greater detail. It would be a place where one could study "all the various musical modes that mankind has made in the course of history" in an ordered way, as if all peoples in world history had been collaborating in a single great project of mode construction. The mode room would be

²¹⁷ Virgil Thomson archives at Yale University, quoted in Von Gunden, *The Music*, 164-65.

“the most important thing musically” he would ever do, and would function in the following way:

What I had in mind was a set of drawers. For example, you could pull a drawer and there would be Ptolemy’s intense diatonic. Then you would have bars, or tuning forks, for an octave. Somewhere in the room there should be a harp or a large instrument which you could tune up over many octaves to really study its characteristics and be able to compose on it. Then there should be a big book which should tell you when the mode was first written down, or where it was first discovered, or what its history in diffusion among people was.²¹⁸

There were varying degrees of clarity as to the derivation and intent of these orderings. Was Harrison prescribing the rigors whereby a good composition and a good compositional career might be fashioned? Was he logically determining the already set rules by which Nature governed the world of music, or at least would if human irrationality didn’t intervene? Was he representing practices that were plainly observable in the real world, facts gathered through fieldwork? Generally he kept such distinctions in a haze. Indeed Harrison’s thinking maintained little differentiation between the prescription of correct action, the deduction of rational truths, and the empirical observation of an “out there” reality. These orderings were presented both as fruitful approaches for the composer to get a methodical hold of his resources and also as logical orderings of the world of music, representations of a musical reality that was “out there,” ultimately as demonstration of the rationality that governed that reality and made music into a bond among humans.

²¹⁸ Harrison, interview by Leyland, reprinted in *LHR*, 77.

Rational Eccentricity

“Music is emotional mathematics. As a matter of fact, it is rational intervals that grip you and emotionally stir you, not the surds of equal temperament, which are from deafness.”

--Lou Harrison, from interview with RK

As he had sworn to Olive Cowell when he was twenty, Harrison had indeed unwaveringly followed his “own precepts,” carrying many “thru to its most ridiculous conclusion.” His inventive understandings of the world of music, besides lending a particular illumination to various things musical and providing the similitudes that permitted his method of musical composition, also severed him from established modes of thought and granted him creative freedom. It enabled a wholesale rebuke of conventionality that maintained such absurd values as, for instance, that of technological advancement. Harrison had rationally and thoroughly remodeled “reality,” and in doing so had turned the concept of “advancement” on its head. He had also made nonsense out of such an idea as the superiority of European classical music, having shown that the high-status music of the concert hall was mostly absurd, and that anyway there really was no such place as “Europe,” only Northwest Asia.

Standardization, mass production, and equal temperament, while themselves components of an ideology of hyper-organization, had no position within Harrison’s system and were understood as features of the absurdity that saturated and dominated the modern world. For all of its regulation, modern society and city life in particular became merely a jumble of irrational numbers, or “surds”: “From the Latin, ‘Surd’=’Deaf’” (*MP*, 7). This label of “Surd,” as a designation of absurdity in both the field of mathematics (an irrational number) and of perception (deafness) became the most searing criticism in

Harrison's vocabulary. It signified not only how maddened mainstream culture was but also how insignificant.

The *Music Primer* is both Harrison's richest compilation of orderings and a testament to his eccentricity in its fullest flower (it presents most of the ordering schemes I have described so far). Harrison's anticonventionalism is apparent in its very production. The calligraphied text has no table of contents, no introduction, and all together little apparent organization (even the treatises of other bohemian composers such as Partch and Cowell were conventional in their layout and tone). The lack of organization is perhaps surprising given Harrison's love of ordering, and given the many orderings that the *Primer* sets forth, yet it seems that, having established the ordered coherence of so many musical concepts, the *Primer* itself was free to express a delight in disorder. Rather than offering a succession of linearly developing ideas, the *Primer* offered a series of seemingly unconnected (though in Harrison's "reality" deeply connected) "Items," the flowerings of his "wild civility."²¹⁹ Harrison declined to exclude ideas that might be seen as ideas irrelevant to a compositional treatise, and he declined to divide types of knowledge into conventional categories. The *Primer* is rather an assortment of vaguely relating compositional methods, observations about transnational music practices, and gracious reflections on life and art.

Among the *Primer's* items are an observation that children studying fractions in school ought to be helped to tune them (page 5); that *composers* ought to write a version of every vocal work in the international language of Esperanto (page 22); brief but detailed instructions for the owner of a copy of the *Music Primer* on how to color in the

²¹⁹ Here I allude to Robert Herrick's "Delight in Disorder," a poem Harrison quoted from in the *Music Primer*.

boxes that precede each item—including suggestions on the possible order of colors and the choice of paints (pages 38-39); an observation that “‘Modern life’ is high-decibel chaos, in smog” (page 44); and a list of 19th-century geniuses that included many social renegades who created their ideas and materials from scratch, but no composers: “Morris, Blake, Zamenhof, Whitman & maybe Dolmetsch—Darwin too, & Thoreau” (page 41).²²⁰

In one glowingly gracious reflection Harrison, rather than describing the qualities of beautiful music, marveled at the blessing that there was music at all:

The miracle is not that so much music exists, nor that so much of it is beautiful—but, rather, that it exists at all. Most music is produced by some fluke of nature—harpsichord jacks just barely pluck & then repass the string, bows just barely pull the strings & then proceed, the plucked string may balk or buzz, even vocal chords grow hoarse & raw. Reeds may or may not vibrate, flutes may wheeze or refuse, lips lapse infirm! Thank heavens that anything works when it does—and the musicians too! (*MP*, 19-20)

In another passage, which I can only imagine to be partially tongue-in-cheek, Harrison gave an idiosyncratic explanation of twelve-tone technique. First, he declared that twelve-tone was a method of composing with “but a single neume (or melodicle).”²²¹

Melodicles were one of Harrison’s early terminological inventions, similar to the concept of neums that he may have received from Cowell. One used melodicles as fragments that build melody through their transposition, retrograde, inversion, and so forth. This statement suggests that at the time he wrote the *Primer*, Harrison had elided his old concept of “melodicle” with “neume” and “twelve-tone row.”

²²⁰ That the 19th century was a sort of Dark Ages to Harrison is attested to by this list of iconoclast poets and craftsmen and anti-industrialists, whose relationship to the prevailing attitudes of their age was one of antagonism. The fact that he was not opposed to science, even if he was opposed to modern technology, is attested to by his inclusion of the intellectual maverick Charles Darwin.

²²¹ *MP*, 15. He had earlier explained that melodicles were “the oldest known method of musical composition, probably deriving from Mesopotamia & Egypt” (1). For an explanation of Harrison’s melodicle technique, see von Gunden, *The Music*. Also, on melodicles, neums, Harrison’s relationship to Schönberg and his own earlier serialist compositions, see Neff, “An Unlikely Synergy.”

Then, with mischief perhaps, Harrison made a more startling assertion about serialism:

Mr. Schoenberg's excellent ear early informed him that there is no tonality in equal temperament (only the octave is a good interval). Being a European, & sharing in Europe's heavy investment in equal temperament, it did not seriously occur to him simply to retune. He invented instead a way of putting some order into an essentially chaotic affair by arranging an order of succession through the unrelated pitches (while systematically avoiding the only related ones—the octaves). Thus, he substituted an order of succession for a hierarchy of relationships. If one is going to have to cope with twelve tones in equal temperament then his method is one very good way of doing so. (*MP*, 15)

This account of the motivation for the twelve-tone technique was clearly quite unlike Schoenberg's own conception and different from that likely held by any twelve-tone composer. Harrison creatively departed from the traditional, insider (he had himself been an insider once) conception of serialism, offering instead a reworking of the idea within his own "reality." He employed his own terminology, so that the tone row became a "melodic," and the complex motivations for serialism's invention became a simple combination of dissatisfaction with tonality under equal temperament and a typically European failure of vision. This statement serves as demonstration of how distorting and inventive were Harrison's configurations of others' practices. I believe that Harrison felt sincere admiration for Schönberg, that he intended nothing back-handed about the above description of his former-teacher's technique. As we have seen, he could be similarly respectful and yet uncompromising in his representations of Asian musics.

Another "Reality" from Cultural Relativism

Contrasting with Harrison's way of viewing the world's musics, in which all were understandable according to certain trans-cultural concepts, is another paradigm that has

emerged in cultural thinking in the twentieth century and been of great importance for the field of ethnomusicology. I will call that paradigm cultural relativism and will define it here in such a way as to serve my present purpose. This is not the cultural relativism that I discussed in the previous chapter on Cowell, which was actually shaped by positivist and evolutionist ideas. Cultural relativism as I define it here has been more influential in ethnomusicology since the field's formal creation in the mid-1950s and as will be seen it continues to be evidenced in ethnomusicological publications.

Corresponding to the “cultural” and “relativism” parts of its name, there are two principal aspects to this cultural relativism that are only fully coherent when considered together. First is the concept of “a culture” as a group with members and usually a location. Culture in this sense is both integrated, meaning that its various forms of expression are understood as part of a larger unity, and bounded, meaning that its members' forms of expression differ from those living outside of the cultural area. Roughly, this cultural relativism regards people within the cultural area as the same as one another and differentiable from those outside of it.

Second is the notion that for members of the cultural group the meaning of cultural practices is constituted exclusively in relation to other practices of the same culture, and that cultural practices have no meaning beyond this internal constitution. This aspect carries implications for both research methodology and values. In terms of methodology, the researcher is challenged with drawing the operative concepts for the interpretation of meaning of a given practice or product (such as music) from within the culture itself, rather than from any external source. In terms of values, the “goodness” or “badness” of any cultural practice or product is to be understood according to modes of evaluation

native to the culture itself. This aspect of cultural relativism has been especially controversial, as it relates to ethical values (is Nazism to be understood as valid within the context of German culture?) At the same time, the relativity of aesthetic values to culture has been largely accepted among ethnomusicologists (at least in print). It is this latter sense of the relative nature of values that has been most significant for ethnomusicology.

The development of various versions of cultural relativism and its centrality in modern anthropological thought is often attributed to Franz Boas and his students, including Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Melville Herskovitz. Herskovitz was one of the first to give formal articulation to cultural relativism.²²² Writing in the first decades after World War II, he championed the principle at a moment when it was both becoming highly influential in the field of anthropology (and in the new discipline of ethnomusicology) and was coming under attack as morally permissive in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In this climate Herskovitz attempted to make clear what cultural relativism was and was not. To him it was methodological: Anthropologists were to be aware of their own cultural biases in conducting field work. It was not moral: Cultural relativism did not command the tolerance of any action as “good” if it only conformed to the definition of “good” within its cultural context.

²²² See James W. Fernandez, “Tolerance in a Repugnant World and Other Dilemmas in the Cultural Relativism of Melville J. Herskovits,” *Ethos* 18, no. 2 (June 1990): 140-164. In the 1950s there was considerable debate on the merits of cultural relativism as a theory and as a basis for ethical and scientific judgments. Arguing against cultural relativism, Frank Hartung stated that “it claims to be empirical but is illogical; it claims to be objective but is surreptitiously moral; it claims to be reasonable but elevates irrationalism; it claims to be scientific but prevents the development of an experimental science of sociocultural conduct.” See Hartung, “Cultural Relativity and Moral Judgments,” *Philosophy of Science* 21, no. 2 (April 1954): 118-126. Herskovits’s defenses of the theory include “Tender- and Tough-Minded Anthropology and the Study of Values in Culture,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 7 (1951): 22-31; and “Some Further Comments on Cultural Relativism,” *American Anthropologist* 60, no. 2 (April 1958): 266-273, 1958. For a more recent discussion of cultural relativism and multiculturalism as bases for government policy, see Amy Gutmann, “The Challenge of Multiculturalism in Political Ethics,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 171-206.

Similarly to Harrison's brand of universalism, Herskovits's cultural relativism opposed evolutionist hierarchy, and was intended to deepen capacities of tolerance. There the similarities ended. With the methodology of cultural relativism, the anthropologist was to be aware that he/she too belonged to a culture, and therefore would inevitably bring his/her own cultural biases into the understanding of other cultures. Above all, the anthropologist would have to be extremely cautious in the declaration of universals, which Herskovits argued often turned out to actually be absolutes—not ideas and preferences everywhere held, but rather the projections of the Western researcher. In fact, according to Herskovits, it was not only ideas and values but even sensory perceptions of reality that were influenced by culture, and therefore even a simple empirical observation by the researcher might not match that made by his research subjects. Culture went so far as to affect seemingly fundamental experiences of taste, color, pain, and time. While the search for universals was key to the Herskovits's anthropological project, he held that more often than not the pronouncement of universals was ethnocentric.

From the cultural relativist perspective, Chinese opera has everything to do with Chinese culture, and Western opera has everything to do with Western culture. While the two may become unified for convenience by the term “opera,” they cannot be meaningfully understood as of a common type. There is no transcultural musical/theatrical category of activity to which they both belong. Neither is there a transcendent, non-culturally defined field of musical values by which they can both be appreciated. In considering foreign objects and practices, it is culture that must be prioritized, not “universal” concepts that, in fact being of Western origin, function to conceal the fundamental differences among cultures.

Once, when pressed in an interview to give a definition of world music, Harrison responded, “well, music is music, no matter where you find it.”²²³ Perhaps the most radical conceptual revision arrived at by cultural relativism in Ethnomusicology has been the antithesis of Harrison’s view. It has been argued that when studying non-Western musics the very concept of “music” must be considered an external imposition on disparate practices that can only be properly defined from within their individual cultural contexts. In other words, not only are particular musical aesthetics culturally contingent, but the very thing we call music is a concept contingent to, invented by, Western culture, and its recognition in the practices of other parts of the world is at best a case of mistaken identity. Judith Becker, for instance, has argued that the organization of both musical time and melody in Javanese music are best understood in relation to other Javanese organization principles, such as those of the calendrical system, and not according to conventional understandings of “tune” that the Western researcher is likely to bring to the field. She herself arrived at this insight only after years of careful and focused study of gamelan “in its own culture”:

Only after several years of performance of Javanese gamelan music, and research into gamelan music, did I begin to suspect that the underlying assumptions of this music, the way this music is conceptualized, have little in common with the concepts underlying the music I grew up with. I had always assumed that “music was music,” anywhere in the world, that musicians were musicians all over the world, and that in spite of surface differences in tone, texture, rhythm, meter, melodic contour, etc., all music derived from common sources, that musicians all over the world used the same kinds of mental processes to produce their melodies. I now feel quite sure that this is not the case, that there is not an abstract “universe of music” which becomes manifest in different ways in different cultures, and the

²²³ Maria Cizmic, “Composing the Pacific: Interviews with Lou Harrison,” Aptos, CA, 1995, <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/echo/Volume1-Issue1/cizmic/cizmic-interview.html>.

term *music* is a rather sloppy cover term applied to acoustic phenomena which are the result of any number of different mental processes and conceptualizations.²²⁴

In ethnomusicology, the introduction of cultural-relativist knowledge has often functioned in critique of concepts held to be universal. Becker's challenge to the universal concept of music is one example. Another, of much significance here, is Mark Perlman's critique of the notion that just intonation is a natural tuning system and that it guides the tuning of gamelans in Java. Perlman presented his argument in an article titled "American Gamelan in the Garden of Eden." By this title I understand him to mean that in the hands of certain modernist composers, foremost among them Lou Harrison, gamelan had been woven into a Western pastoral mythology that had nothing whatsoever to do with its role in Java.²²⁵

Harrison had given us gamelans in just intonation, by constructing them, composing for them, and making statements suggesting, though never in the most direct terms, that just intonation is a proper characteristic of gamelan. In response, Perlman, who has interviewed musicians and gamelan makers in Central Java, asks us to examine the principle of just intonation alongside another intonational principle, the Javanese *embat*. He tells us that it is *embat* that properly accounts for Javanese tuning, and not the Western, supposedly trans-cultural principle of just intonation. Whereas just intonation proposes a single intonational ideal based on numeric ratios, *embat* proposes valuing the unique intervallic contour possessed by each set of instruments. Any given gamelan's *embat* is particular and irreproducible. While *embat* is certainly not the same as equal

²²⁴ Judith Becker, "Time and Tune in Java," in *The Imagination of Reality: Essays in Southeast Asian Coherence Systems*, ed. A.L. Becker and Aram Yengoyan (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1979), 98.

²²⁵ Mark Perlman, "American Gamelan in the Garden of Eden: Intonation in a Cross-Cultural Encounter," *The Musical Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 510-555. Perlman also mentions David Doty and Daniel Schmitt as members of the American gamelan scene who are committed to just intonation.

temperament, neither does it function as the antithesis of equal temperament in the way that Harrison viewed just intonation.

Perlman's contrasting of just intonation with the individuality-oriented *embat* makes the former come to seem rigid (as rigid as the equal temperament Harrison rebels against). One might conclude that, whereas just intonation is founded on a single principle (the use of the simplest ratios intervals possible), the aesthetic underlying Javanese *embat* is without principles, similar to personality.²²⁶ Personality is unique to each individual, and that uniqueness is one of the positive things about personality. It can be said that some personalities are more pleasant than others, and yet there could never be a single principle that defines the goodness or badness of personalities, nor a formula from which good personalities could be derived, for such would run counter to personality's very essence as unique. In Java, then, each gamelan could be said to have a personality, the uniqueness of which is valued and which cannot be understood or derived through any formulaic method, including that of just intonation.²²⁷

Cultural relativism, as I have described it, is important to Perlman's articulation of the case. In relativizing Harrison's values on intonation by contrasting them with *embat*, his stated purpose is not to refute just intonation but to show how in each case the "discourse

²²⁶ What among gamelan musicians is called *watak*. On one occasion during my 2007 field study in Central Java, my teacher Sudarsono explained to me that the *bonang*'s (an instrument of gongs arranged horizontally on a rack, on which he was currently giving me a lesson) *watak* is to play behind the beat. He explained this by way of encouraging me to be more relaxed and not rush as I practiced. According to Marc Benamou ("Rasa in Javanese Musical Aesthetics," Ph.D. diss. [Univ. of Michigan, 1998]), *watak* is primarily the inborn aspect of personality. Unlike other aspects of identity which can be developed or refined, a person's *watak* cannot be changed or erased. It is therefore that which most deeply characterizes a person. *Ghending* (musical pieces in the gamelan tradition) are also said to have *watak*.

²²⁷ Benamou describes two *embat* associated with *slendro*, both of which are named for female characters of the Mahabharata. One, Larasati, was "*branyak* (brash but not crude) of character," while the other, Sundari, was "*luruh* (humble) of character." There is little agreement among gamelan musicians as to what precisely in terms of tuning gives these two *embat* their qualities, but "all agree that *embat* Sundari is calm and refined...and *embat* larasati is coquettish or spritely" ("Rasa," 302-304).

of intonation can be shown to embody the preoccupations of the culture that produced it.” Discourses, Perlman explains, “reflect wider themes of each society.” Perlman argues that, though Harrison might seem to some to be a dissident of Western culture, he was actually “clinging tenaciously to ideas deeply embedded in Western music history (read: as opposed to values evident on the culture’s surface)”²²⁸ and was merely projecting those ideas onto Javanese gamelan.

Perlman’s primary aim is to show how the “juxtaposition of elements from two radically different music-cultures throws the deepest presuppositions of each into bold relief.” He does not argue that composers such as Harrison are wrong to create gamelans in just intonation, only that we must understand that they are doing something that is “Western” and not “Javanese”:

As a student of traditional Javanese gamelan music (*karawitan*), I find this [association of just intonation with the gamelan] an odd superposition of musical concerns. Music in Java has nothing to do with just intonation—not in its interval usage, not in its theory, not in its intellectual context. By impressing just intervals into their gamelan, American composers, consciously or not, have infused a Western soul into a Javanese substance.²²⁹

Leaving aside the question of whether just intonation is in any sense appropriate for gamelan, I would like to turn to another absolute held by Harrison that could be similarly relativized. That is Harrison’s belief in “quiet” as an absolute good, and “noise” as an absolute bad, which led him into what Leta Miller has termed a “battle against noise pollution.”²³⁰ The questions of what sorts of noises are desirable and what are not, what

²²⁸ Perlman, “American Gamelan,” 511.

²²⁹ Perlman, “American Gamelan,” 513.

²³⁰ I rely in the following analysis upon information provided in Miller and Lieberman’s (*Lou Harrison*) account of Harrison’s attitude toward noise pollution.

decibel levels are desirable, in what locations, and to what extent one person ought to put up with the noise of another person, are of quite broad societal concern compared with the issue of which system of intonation is the best. With noises generated by machinery and amplified music defining the modern soundscape, the notion of there being such a thing as “noise pollution” has become widespread in the U.S.. Can “peace and quiet” be regarded as a universal good? Do our aural environments need protection from noise in the same sense that a river needs protection from man-made pollutants? Do we have a right to peace and quiet, or conversely a right to be noisy?

I do not really seek to answer these complicated questions, only to suggest how research informed by cultural relativism may be used in critique of Harrison’s views. His notion of Quiet as an absolute good can be understood as of a piece with his belief that the pleasantness or unpleasantness of musical experiences was dependent purely upon the sound itself, not upon the person listening. Subjectivity was not important to the apprehension of beauty: once everyone had “linked their minds and their ears,” all would perceive beauty, intrinsic to sounds themselves, in the same way. Beauty was a feature of sound, and “the ear” was merely a tool of that intrinsic beauty’s perception. Such an idealized human ear in its natural and healthy state would be attuned to receive pleasure only from rational sounds.

Just as cultural knowledge and individual personality were not factors in the determination of good intonation, neither were they factors in the determination of good volume. The following, from an interview in 1994 with Miller, is Harrison’s description of the displeasure that he and Colvig experienced when attending a loud concert:

I concluded that people who live in cities now are deaf. We’re country boys; we don’t need that. The anxiety aroused by that amount of sound was such that I

could no longer have the kinetic response. I could see that there were humans on the stage, and they were doing things, but my body did not respond. The ear was cut in two. Such loud-tech nonsense represents the contemporary way of impressing one with the establishment. All the corporate power is there. I don't need it.²³¹

Harrison needed to make little distinction between his private, momentary experience at the event (“anxiety,” no “kinetic response,” “my body did not respond”), his enduring personal preferences (“We’re country boys; we don’t need that”; “I don’t need it”), and external realities (“people who live in cities are deaf” and “loud-tech nonsense” represents “corporate power”), as the three had no effective difference within Harrison’s internally logical “reality.” The most interesting utterance in the above quotation is “*The* ear was cut in two,” for in its very grammar, the addition of the direct article “the,” it conflates the personal and the universal. Taken it in the context of Harrison’s reality, we may understand that there was no logical distinction between his ear and “the” universal ear, and as such his momentary experience and that of everyone (or at least everyone with a sensible ear; remember that “deafness” and “absurdity” were the same to Harrison) was logically the same.²³²

Given Harrison’s love of Javanese gamelan and his view of Quiet as an absolute good, it is perhaps ironic that anthropologists and ethnomusicologists working in Java have found a cultivated aesthetic of “noisiness,” and indeed interpreted that aesthetic as important to gamelan. They have described a Javanese love of noise that, far from having been introduced with modernization or corporatization, is actually an aspect of traditional

²³¹ Harrison, interview by Miller, 13 Jan. 1994, in *CAW*, 185.

²³² In his keynote for Microfest 2001, Harrison made a similar comment about loud music. He described the difficulty he had with the workers constructing his home in Aptos, who chose to play loud music while they worked: “It turns out that they are quite incapable now of doing their work without this sound constantly in the background. They must apparently be connected with the great electric umbilicus. So much for that state of affairs” (“Microfest 2001,” 8).

culture. They have observed that the Javanese have long tolerated and even valued a level of noisiness and busyness that exceeds that of normal Western social boundaries, that Javanese communities, whether in cities or villages, have a tradition of cultivated noisiness.²³³

This Javanese concept of *ramé*, or, in a word, lively noise, presents a challenge to the idea that the extent of tolerance for and enjoyment of noise and loudness is universal. Sarah Weiss describes *ramé* as a value evident in both the most modern and traditional forms of Javanese expression:

The cacophony of the Javanese world can be overwhelming to some, yet it is highly valued by most Javanese people. The aural atmosphere of the preparation for any kind of celebratory event should be *ramé*, or bustling and lively (in Javanese). Multiple sound sources are integral to the creation of the *keraméan* (*keramaian*, Indonesian) of the moment, including the combined airing of heavily amplified radio or cassette music—often from several sources—impromptu speeches, the sounds of hawkers, the increasingly organized sounds of multiple groups of musicians as they prepare to perform. Traditional Javanese gamelan music, or *karawitan*, is itself aurally *ramé* in the sense that there are many musical events happening simultaneously in the texture of the music. The listener's ear is not drawn primarily to one predominant melody and then to the accompaniment.²³⁴

Based on his observations while doing fieldwork in Java, R. Anderson Sutton has argued that in the playing of digital and analogue recordings it is not just desirable volume that is culturally relative, but also desirable distortion. He describes how, whereas as a Westerner he had once assumed the absence of distortion was an absolute value for

²³³ See Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (New York: The Free Press, 1960), 49; and Alton Becker, "Text Building, Epistemology, and Aesthetics in Javanese Shadow Theater," in *The Imagination of Reality: Essays in Southeast Asian Coherence Systems*, ed. A.L. Becker and Aram Yengoyan (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1979), 211-43.

²³⁴ Sarah Weiss, *Listening to an Earlier Java: Aesthetics, Gender, and the Meaning of Wayang in Central Java* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2006), 4.

recordings, in fact in Java he came to see that both the ability to perceive distortion and the valuing of it were culturally determined:

But is “distortion” a culturally relative notion? To some extent, I believe it is. Without having conducted controlled experiments myself, I am unable to present statistical evidence in support of my belief. However, on a number of occasions Javanese friends commented to me on the “good” (*apik, bagus*) or “clean” (*resik*) quality of cassette recordings that I judged to be somewhat distorted—although *less so* than many other recording I heard in Java. The threshold of distortion perception—and certainly the threshold of distortion tolerance—would seem, then to be variable in human experience, conditioned by various environmental and cultural factors. Even if one accepts the notion of such variability, however, it is clear that the degree to which high volume settings alter sound quality in Java is unquestionably noticed by most Javanese listeners, and yet it does not appear to bother most listeners.²³⁵

As seen in the above quotation by Weiss, *ramé* has been used to give a larger cultural frame to the extreme polyphonic floridness of Central Javanese gamelan: gamelan is one phenomenon of noisiness among others, including hawkers, impromptu speeches, and, most significantly here, “heavily amplified” music. Sutton associates gamelan aesthetics with the “busy” patterns of batik cloths, and again with heavily amplified music, often from multiple sources.²³⁶ The music of Central Javanese gamelan is, from within this frame, not an expression of Harrison’s quiet, regular, pastoral values, but rather of the noisy, teeming chaos (so it can seem to a visitor) characteristic of a Javanese marketplace or festival. From this angle, it would seem that gamelan in Java is performed with the same spirit as the blasting of recorded music for an entire neighborhood.

²³⁵ R. Anderson Sutton, “Interpreting Electronic Sound Technology in the Contemporary Javanese Soundscape,” *Ethnomusicology* 40, no. 2 (1996): 253.

²³⁶ Sutton, “Interpreting,” 258.

Conclusions

As a theory of culture, cultural relativism ought to be able to account for a cultural phenomenon such as Harrison's Double Concerto. Yet, cultural relativism's view of meaning as constituted within the integrated and bounded context of "a culture" makes conceiving of the piece quite difficult. First, there is the problem of Harrison's being influenced by ideas from "outside" of his culture, most obviously in his use of Javanese gamelan. Cross-cultural influence as such is difficult to account for coming from the cultural-relativist viewpoint that I have described. Second, Harrison seems to have worked vigorously to sever himself from many of the practices of his own culture, such as its dominant preference for equal temperament. The idea that a member of a culture might not exhibit the tendencies of the culture is also difficult to conceive of from the cultural-relativist perspective, sometimes forcing an interpretation of the individual's ideas as either idiosyncratic or, as Perlman argues, as actually exemplary of those of their culture on a more "deeply embedded" level than is obvious.

Though in this chapter I have focused my critique upon Harrison's reality, I hope also to have at least suggested that his Double Concerto presents something of a challenge to cultural relativism. As a theory of difference, cultural relativism has its own limitations based on its way of organizing difference and non-difference. Whereas Harrison had severed musics into two types depending on their positive or negative relationship to certain absolute values, cultural relativism divides all cultures from one another, and views any given music as in some way integrated into the whole of a single culture (or else is left with regarding it as idiosyncratic). This is one reason I find Harrison's hybrid compositions such as the Double Concerto to be so interesting, and for me it is an aspect

of their beauty. Not only do they present a challenge to myopic ethnocentrism by introducing non-Western idioms into concert music settings; pieces like the Double Concerto also challenge our supposedly more objective cultural relativism.

It is also worth observing the extent to which Harrison's universalism and cultural relativism have had the same goals. Both combat ethnocentrism, though by quite different means. Harrison's universalism diminished the significance of ethnic difference: It demonstrated that ethnocentrism was a mistake because the ethnic differences that it supposed were in fact mere surface variations, ripples upon an ocean of unity. Meanwhile cultural relativism has combated ethnocentrism by amplifying the importance of difference, insisting that values are culturally contingent and thereby removing the grounds for passing absolute judgment on the practices of others. (Nor, argues Renteln, does cultural relativism imply all cultures' values to be "equally valid," for to claim so would necessitate that there be a scale for assessing value that lies outside of culture.) From Harrison's view, cross-cultural respect was established through recognition of similitude, the fundamental positive regularities that connect all humans. Meanwhile, for cultural relativism respect may come through recognition of previously unrecognized terms by which people of different cultures make their claims to dignity. Finally, as Harrison's reality enabled examination, critique, and even a personal break from values he felt to be oppressive, so has cultural relativism been often employed in challenges to hegemony.

It must finally be restated that, though I have argued that Harrison created his own "reality," I do not think he was living a fantasy. Harrison's reality was no more a fantasy than the next person's. It was a good-faith attempt at coming to terms with a complex

world, of which he had an unusual broad knowledge. Rather than holding Harrison's worldview up to impossible standards of objectivity, it may be best to assess it in terms of its effects. What can be said here is that, as Harrison's reality was not backed by significant institutional power, the force it did have was counter-cultural. On a personal level for him it was liberating and productive. It was exceptional not in its deviation from objective truth, but in the extent to which it carried through on its own terms of coherence, seamlessly coordinating every aspect of Harrison's knowledge, whether musical, ethical, scientific, or political. Harrison's enormous body of creative works was the "reality's" outpourings, which communicated it and became material evidence for it. It is thanks to this legacy, Harrison's poems, calligraphied treatises, aluminum gamelans, and his compositions, that we can so clearly hear his world of integrated and perfected reason and intuition, his "Whole Round World," as if through his own ears.

Chapter V: Conclusions: Reflections upon Modernism as a Peculiar Style of Concern with Difference

Throughout this dissertation I have used certain terms that were also used by these composers, though sometimes not in precisely the same ways. One is *modernist*. All of the composers I have studied identified at one point or another, in one way or another, with this label. All of them, for instance, published in the journal *Modern Music*. They might not have agreed, however, with my definition of the term and might have resented my choice to label them with it. I have used *modernism* in reference to what I have found to be the sparse but distinctive ideological features that unite these composers and distinguish them from other discourse communities. My use of the term has arisen from the specific materials I have studied, and as such may not correspond precisely to other *modernisms*, defined by other scholars in light of other materials.

In particular, my understanding of modernism differs from those that prioritize style as definitional to the movement, counting as modernists, for instance, only those composers who worked in a dissonant idiom. All three of the composers of this study worked with intense dissonance only at times, and in particular Harrison—whose medium from about 1960 onward tended to be consonant and backward-looking to the euphoniousness of past centuries—has been championed as having “moved beyond” modernism into postmodernism or into some other, broader worldview. I have prioritized ideology in my definition of modernism, and the result has been a quite broad net that captures both dissonant and non-dissonant styles indifferently, and even captures the

outward-looking and backward-looking Harrison. The advantage of this approach is that it has allowed me to observe ideological agreement between composers who conceived of themselves—and continue to be conceived of by commentators—as bitterly opposed.

Accounts of modernist ideology often list among its attributes scientism and progress-orientation. For instance, noting that serialism came to dominate in institutions of composition following the Second World War, Born and Hesmondhalgh contrast the rising ideological flavor of this modernist movement with the one that preceded it: “The earlier modernist (or proto-postmodernist) experiments with representations of others—whether exotic, nationalistic, or populist—gave way to an increasingly abstract, scientific, and rationalist formalism based still on the near or total negation of tonality.”²³⁷ Born argues that postwar high modernism asserted musical autonomy in the deliberate exclusion of the representation of non-Western music, and denied that it was limited by ethnicity. “The lineage that became institutionally and ideologically dominant in musical modernism—serialism and its aftermath—and which is defined as an absolute and autonomous aesthetic development, won out over the eclecticism of other early modernist experiments, including the various forms of aesthetic reference to other musics” (p. 18).

As a study of Cowell and Harrison, my project is an examination of the experimentalist tradition that Born/Hesmondhalgh and others have defined in distinction from the serialist/“high modernist” vein of modernist composition.²³⁸ Without wishing to

²³⁷ Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, eds., *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000), 18.

²³⁸ It is important for my present purpose of suggesting continuities between the rationalism and scientism of Cowell-style experimentalism and “high modernism” to distinguish between the experimentalism of Cowell (and his followers) with that of Cage (and his followers). On the matter of what each understood “experiment” to be—in terms of its salient aspects for the purposes of a composer—,

deny the many important distinctions between, for instance, a Harrison and a Boulez, I have found that, in certain regards, these experimentalists were not as different from the high modernists of Born/Hesmondhalgh's description as it might seem. In particular, the rationalism and scientism with which those authors characterize high modernism characterize Cowell and Harrison as well (we have seen that Harrison's views on science were highly idiosyncratic, but he nevertheless claimed that a science-based certainty underlay his endeavors). Musical autonomy, as we have seen, was a key concept in McPhee's representation of "the absolute music of Bali." And while these composers can justifiably be called "eclectic" (and perhaps, in Cowell's case, "relativist"), they held their interests in ethnic differences to a great extent in hopes of developing a relationship with musical materials that would be transcendent of ethnicity (in other words, in search of a truer, less ethnocentric musical autonomy).

Intellectual individualism was a tendency of these composers. This does not imply isolationism. As we have seen, McPhee, Cowell, and Harrison, though driven to develop highly personalized forms of expression, did not work in vacuums. Far from it; individualism was a collective value (though, it would seem, it gave rise to the modernist myth of isolation that some composers cultivated and has been cultivated on their behalf—notably Ives²³⁹). By intellectual individualism, I mean the drive to see the world

they were utterly dissimilar. Cowell's *experimentalism* was a rationalistic endeavor intended to uncover through experimental processes scientifically verifiable truths of music that would yield material advancements in musical technology. Cage's *experimentalism* was meanwhile conceived as a cultivation of equanimious consciousness in relation to musical results, in the manner in which a scientist was charged with developing equanimious receptivity to the results of experimentation. In brief, Cowell was interested in the products of experiment, while Cage was interested in its processes. While the two attitudes were not necessarily mutually exclusive (and perhaps were not exclusionary in the minds of all experimental composers), for the present purposes, only the experimentalism of the Cowell school is significant.

²³⁹ For instance, Cowell wrote in 1932: "While he was developing his materials and style, Ives attended practically no concerts, certainly none in which "modern" usages were shown. Yet in some of his work,

afresh, distinct from all other visions, and to develop a unique aesthetic and moral position towards the world. The composers of this study expressed their unique visions through writings and compositions. They were influenced by colleagues and sometimes gave credit, but each of the modernist composers I have studied was ultimately determined to find an utterly distinctive angle upon art, and to develop for himself a voice never heard before. (Colin McPhee was impressed with the less individualistic method of composition among the Balinese, perhaps out of discontent with the individualism required of him in the modernist milieu).

This modernist individualism has placed a special demand upon me as researcher. As I noted in the Introduction, I have had to devote very careful study to each individual's conception of difference, because each was a new creation. Perhaps I have needed to employ a more microscopic lens than I would have were I critiquing the writings of academics, for whereas academics tend find reward in innovating within well established paradigms, these artists claimed their fame through developing idiosyncratic, even eccentric personal visions. Harrison in particular went to lengths to reinvent his entire "reality," to an extent that probably would have been untenable had he been an academic.

All three composers brought their modernist compositional imperative to create products of radical originality into their cultural thinking, and the result was that, though each devoted himself to very careful study, at times he may have felt legitimized in crafting styles of knowledge that were "creative," but, by academic standards, "problematic." This tension can be seen in the treatises of Harrison and Cowell, devoted equally to the task of giving guidance to young composers and to representing the "truth

Ives with his innovations precedes his famous European contemporaries, Schönberg and Stravinsky" ("American Composers IX: Charles Ives," *Modern Music* 10, no. 1 [November-December 1932]: 29).

of music.” A dual function of prescription and representation—in guiding others in regards to what was “good” of music on the one hand, and what was “true” of music on the other—would not have been likely to motivate anthropological treatises, which are conventionally only dedicated to the task of (cultural) representation.²⁴⁰ If these composers’ representations of the differences “out there” in the world of music are problematic, this fact may be understood as an outcome of the peculiar dual purpose that they served.

All three composers shared a view that there was a “nature” of music: that music was not simply a blanket term applied to things invented, performed, and lived with and through, but was indeed something “out there” with inherent properties, which it was the task of the composer (at least one of any worth) to understand in an innovative way. (All three of these composers also allowed for relativism in their own ways.) Cowell based his musical truth upon the overtone series and a variety of other systematic manipulations and expansions upon the science with which he was familiar. Harrison’s musical truth included an interest in just intonation. McPhee used his studies in Bali to discover the immanent features of music (emotional expression was not one). In this way, it became possible for these three composers to not only make evaluations of the musics of others in

²⁴⁰ Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (New York: W. Morrow & Company, 1928.) offers an interesting comparison, because it was an ethnography that, while serving the function of representing Samoan culture, also explicitly functioned as a prescription for American society (see Martin), based upon her findings in Samoa. In terms of its representation of Samoan culture, Mead’s book has come under intense criticism. Whatever Mead’s legacy to anthropology, positive or negative, it may be said that if her representation was problematic, it was so largely because, like the composers I have studied, she created her object of study in order suit a purpose other than neutral representation—what she saw as the positive development of American culture. See Martin, “Relativism and the Reflexiveness of Interpretation: Margaret Mead and *Coming of Age in Samoa*,” chap. 8 in *The Languages*, 212-233.

terms of whether they were “good” or “bad,” but further to arrive at evaluations of their “truth” or “falsehood.”

Cowell at one point reflected upon this trend of composers becoming increasingly interested in allowing their compositional decisions to be guided by notions of what music “really was”: “There is an ever-widening interest among musicians and music-lovers concerning the nature of *what* is being played, as well as *how* it is being played” (NOM, I: 1). And further, “the study [of harmony] is generally unsatisfactory. [It] has not been made into a scientific and reasonable exposition of the subject of harmony. It is a leftover from the time when the aim was not to know facts about harmony, but to know the conventions of ‘good taste’ as recommended by famous and skilled musicians” (NOM, I: 7).

For each of these composers—in very different and dramatic ways—their inquiries into the absolute nature of music were part of a struggle for personal, musical freedom. This means that all of these developed theories of the “true” nature of music, were, explicitly or not, strategic moves in a battle with other approaches to music-making (often dominant and uncompromising approaches). Harrison, for instance, in arguing for just intonation and against equal temperament, was claiming the freedom to compose as he liked, not simply because he like it, but because it was, after all, “right.” Cowell was similar, with his grounding of tone clusters and complex polyrhythms in a single scientific system, and his denigration of conventional harmony instruction as haphazard: “The conventional study of harmony is neither a science, giving impartial facts concerning chords and their connection, nor is it a technique which can be followed in order to reach a style in which any composer would wish to write music at the present

time” (*NOM*, I: 10). Conventional harmony instruction had arrogantly represented itself as scientific, and it was therefore incumbent upon Cowell to develop a “true” harmonic science in order to debunk it and free the student from its many “do not’s.” The science of non-conventionalism was, it seems, the only weapon for battling the science of conventionalism.

Resentment was a consistent motivating force for these modernists, and adversarial concerns gave shape to their ideas through-and-through. All three composers displayed marked resentment towards specific dominating musical ideas and styles, and with every breath and tone they committed to representing non-Western musical ideas and styles it was simultaneously their objective to represent, define, and repute those former ideas and styles, which were, in a burdensome sense, “theirs.” Although the object of each composer’s resentment was inevitably constructed, those objects were certainly no more a fantasy than were the foreign musics that these composers constructed in antithesis to them and in confirmation of the validity of their own projects.

There has perhaps not been anything wholly radical about this dissertation, but in a few respects I hope it will offer new analytical perspectives to historical musicology and ethnomusicology. I hope to have provided a suggestion of possible ways to extend upon the way musicologists examine composers who have composed “interculturally” and represented non-Western musics.²⁴¹ I have striven in this project to avoid either of two extremes: on the one hand to uncritically accept these composers’ representations of non-

²⁴¹ There is already an abundance of musicological studies on the broad topic of cultural difference. Musicological essay collections on the topic include Jonathan Bellman, ed., *The Exotic in Western Music* (Boston: Northeastern University Press: 1998); Born and Hesmondhalgh. eds. *Western Music and its Others*; Yayoi Uno Everett and Frederick Lau, eds., *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); Radano, Ronald and Philip V. Bohlman, eds., *Music and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

Western music, on the other to dismiss their representations as mere exoticism, as a mere manipulation of Orientalist tropes rather than as significant engagements with their objects worthy of thoughtful consideration. As I discussed in the chapter on McPhee, the tendency of some scholarship to move toward one of these extremes or the other—finding the virtue of authenticity in one composer and vice of exoticism in another—has sometimes arisen from external stylistic and ideological issues, which run independently from the question of authenticity itself. This said, it is certainly the case that some composers have given a great deal of care to their cultural representations, while others have approached the matter with frivolity and ethnocentrism, and that scholars have had an understandable desire to bring each of these treatments to their readership’s attention.

This project has focused on three composers who, like many other modernists, could not be accused of having simply invented exoticist fantasies. Each devoted careful study to their chosen non-Western topics, and each was supremely committed to fidelity, as he imagined it might be achieved. The question I have ultimately hoped to have addressed is not whether the representations of each composer were true or false, but by what means they staked their claim to truth. I have not critiqued these composers’ representations by rejecting them in favor of another truth about “the Orient,” or any particular culture.

I hope that what I have presented may be of interest to ethnomusicologists who are giving thought to the epistemological concerns of their field. Like many ethnomusicologists, I take the position that the analytical methods for arriving at “pure” and “unproblematic” cultural representation do not now exist, and are not likely to exist in the foreseeable future. In particular, although I have introduced knowledge developed within ethnomusicology’s long-dominant cultural relativist epistemology as a contrast

with certain aspects of the knowledges of McPhee, Cowell, and in particular Harrison (I also have aimed to suggest that there are continuities between all three and current ethnomusicology), I have not done so with the intention of replacing the latter with the former. This dissertation presents fragments of ethnomusicology's ideological heritage from the mouths of these composers, and suggests ways in which ethnomusicology can become increasingly critical of its own limited modes of understanding difference.

As I have noted, I began this project with the hope of developing a method of analyzing hybrid compositions. In the end I have analyzed the terms by which each composer constructed a world in which hybrids could exist. We can know that these were not fantasy worlds: in McPhee's *Tabuh-tabuhan*, Cowell's *United Quartet*, and Harrison's Double Concerto we can hear the "reality" of each.

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